THE ROGUES ISSUE

JUL/AUG 2025 • DO NOT COLLECT $200

That's the law, Folks!

OR IS IT? MAYBE? WHO EVEN KNOWS ANYMORE?

ANDY GREENBERG ON THE **KINGPIN OF DMT**

EVAN RATLIFF ON THE **TERRIFYING ZIZIANS**

KATE KNIBBS ON **AI MUSIC MADNESS**

BOBBIE JOHNSON ON **NORTH KOREAN IT SCAMMERS**

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Rogue Nation

AT WIRED, WE'VE had a long-running obsession with rogues. This is, after all, a publication that was founded in the early '90s, born of a desire to champion the subversive, disruptive advent of the internet—and the hackers, hustlers, and blue-sky lunatics consumed by the possibilities of a digitized and interconnected planet.

Of course, WIRED had no idea, then, just what those rogues would ultimately unleash: a proliferation of bad actors wreaking havoc across the web; a booming industry of online conspiracy theorists whose dangerous convictions threaten everything from the health of our children to the strength of our democracies; and a coterie of tech billionaires with checkbooks and megaphones that reach from Silicon Valley all the way to the White House. Yes, rogues built the internet and inspired a technological revolution. Now, a mutated and much more powerful version of that same lawless spirit threatens to undo much of the incredible progress that technology and scientific inquiry have unlocked. DOGE Boys: I'm looking at you.

In this edition of WIRED, we're finding plenty of ways to show you just how roguish, how crooked, and how precarious our world has become. Matt Burgess brings you the inside story of Nigeria's Yahoo Boys and the "scam influencer" teaching them how to pull sophisticated digital cons on American victims. From Andy Greenberg, a timeline of ghost guns culminating in the one that Luigi Mangione allegedly used to murder a health care CEO in broad daylight—an act that's turned Mangione into the internet's most beloved rogue in recent memory. (Head to WIRED.com to watch what happened when Andy tried to re-create that weapon himself.) And from Evan Ratliff, the sweeping, bone-chilling saga of the Zizians, a group of gifted young technologists who became the world's first AI-inflected death cult and allegedly killed six people over several violent, chaotic years.

Scam influencers? DIY guns? AI death cults? Yes, things are rough out there. But we wouldn't be WIRED without finding—and even creating—a little bit of roguish fun amid the gloom. Elsewhere in this issue, we'll introduce you to a new and inspiring era of antiestablishment rebellion that's taking root: Amber Scorah, the cofounder of a nonprofit that helps whistleblowers safely share information with the masses, is one such example. Another is Bluesky CEO Jay Graber, who sat down with Kate Knibbs to elaborate on her vision for a democratized social internet. Plus, our Gear experts will show you the slickest, most villainous products to outfit your supervillain lair.

If you take one thing from our Rogues Issue, I hope it's this: "Rogue" is by no means a pejorative—even if it feels like more nasty bad actors than ever, perched in the highest seats of power, are running roughshod over pretty much everything. In fact, I'd argue that this moment calls for more rogues rather than fewer. The idealistic rogues. The indefatigable rogues. The new iteration of blue-sky lunatics who can imagine what a better world should look like—and are willing to fight the status quo to get us there. So be the rogue you want to see in the world, and know that WIRED, with every ounce of rebel spirit in our DNA, will be right there with you.

—KATIE DRUMMOND
Global Editorial Director

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Akasha Song manufactured the drug in secret, sold it for millions on the dark web, and—for a while—lived a literal dream.
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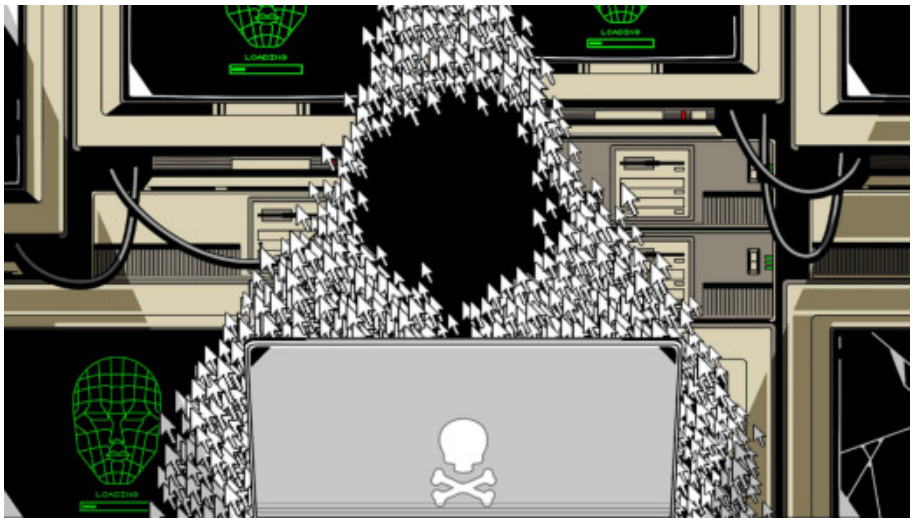

On the Cover

Who qualifies as a rogue in 2025? As we were putting this issue together, we realized ... we didn't know! Criminals? Resisters? Idealists? Journalists? All of the above? In the end, we decided the world has gone so topsy-turvy that only a Looney Tunes–inspired cover, suggesting both confinement and escape, made any sense at all.

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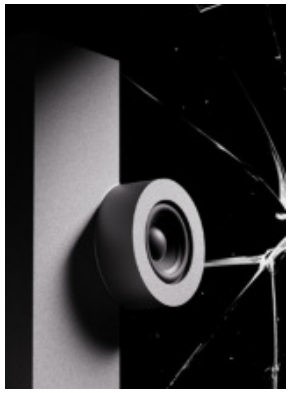

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by WIRED staff

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THE GREATEST CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE GLOBAL HERO WHO CHANGED THE COURSE OF HISTORY

HISTORIC EVENT

AN EVENING WITH PRESIDENT

LECH WALESA

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE WINNER AND FORMER PRESIDENT OF POLAND

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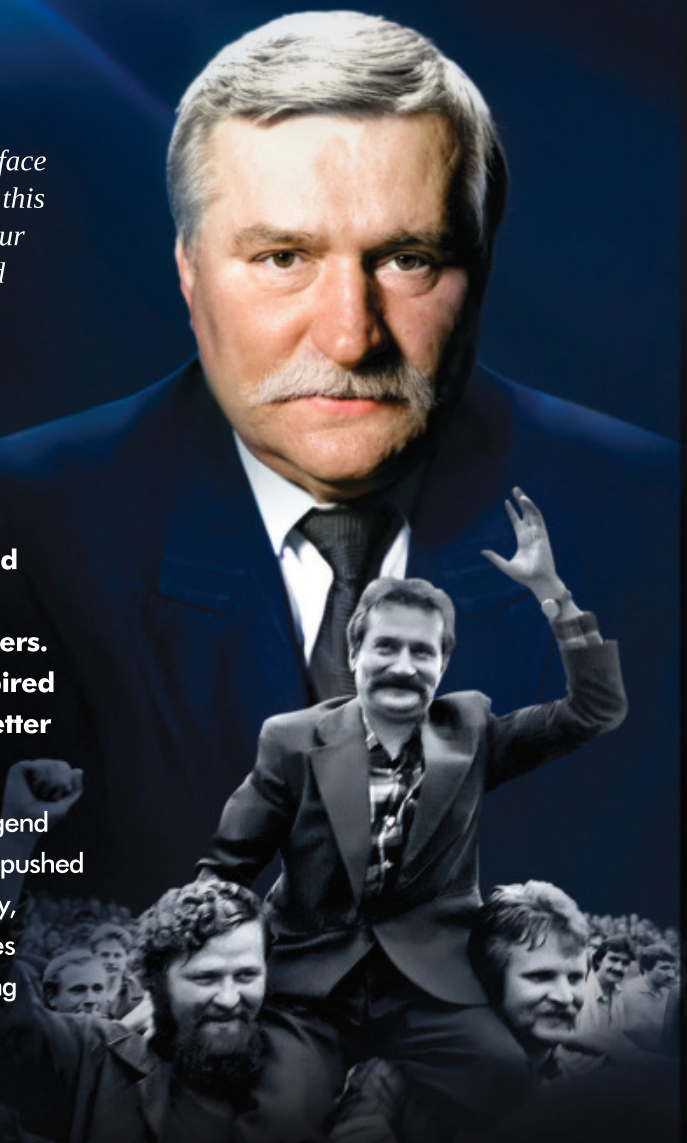

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Sep 18	Austin, TX
Sep 20	Dallas, TX
Sep 22	Atlanta, GA
Sep 24	Columbus, OH
Sep 26	Pittsburgh, PA
Sep 27	Baltimore, MD
Sep 28	Cleveland, OH
Sep 30	Minneapolis, MN
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Oct 4	Chicago, IL
Oct 5	Milwaukee, WI
Oct 9	Miami, FL
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Oct 13	Boston, MA
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BY MATT BURGESS

ILLUSTRATION BY MANUEL CETIN

HOW TO WIN FOLLOWERS AND SCAMFLUENCE PEOPLE

When West Africa's notorious Yahoo Boys need to freshen up their repertoire of online scams, there's one man they turn to.

AS SOON AS Format Boy answers the phone, I recognize his booming voice. I've spent weeks immersed in the influencer's back catalog of videos and voice notes. Format Boy isn't like other influencers: He doesn't show his face, and he won't tell me his real name. He isn't posting motivational content or seeking lucrative brand deals. Instead, he's teaching his audience how to orchestrate high-paying online scams.

Format Boy—as he styles himself on YouTube, Telegram, Instagram, and X, where he has amassed thousands of followers and racked up hundreds of thousands of views—acts as an unofficial adviser to a collective of menacing West African fraudsters known as the Yahoo Boys.

Typically these cybercriminals, mostly young men, work from their phones or laptops to con wealthy foreigners—often Americans—out of their life savings. Some have started using face-swapping and deepfakes to enhance their grifts. In one recent development, Yahoo Boys posted fake CNN broadcasts with AI-generated newscasters designed to trick people they're blackmailing into thinking they've been outed on the news.

Often based in Nigeria, Yahoo Boys build elaborate relationships with their victims over weeks or months before they extract whatever cash they can. They're not the most technically sophisticated scammers, but they're agile and skillful social engineers. Victims in the US, UK, and elsewhere have lost millions to Yahoo Boys in recent years, and multiple teenage boys have reportedly taken their own lives after being blackmailed and sextorted by them.

Yahoo Boys have their own terminology—a code of sorts—that helps them run scams (and potentially avoid social media moderation teams). Victims are called "clients." "Bombing" involves messaging hundreds of online accounts to see if someone responds. Scams are known as "formats" (hence the name Format Boy). And there are formats for all occasions. Romance and dating formats try to get people to fall in love; cops and FBI officials are mimicked in impersonation scams; Elon Musk formats pretend to be the centibillionaire. There are investment scams, gift card scams, the list goes on. Hundreds of scripts, which can be copied and pasted directly to a victim, float around the internet. One is called "50 Questions to Ask Your Client as a Yahoo Boy."

There's a whole hustle culture surrounding the Yahoo Boys. They pose with luxury cars and wear elaborate jewelry. On social media, hundreds of pages and groups, often explicitly using "Yahoo" in their names, claim to mentor newcomers, teach them the skills they need to

A hustle culture surrounds the Yahoo Boys. They pose with luxury cars and wear elaborate jewelry. Social media groups claim to mentor newcomers.

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con people, and provide them with the tools to do so.

Format Boy is one of the more prominent, or at least obvious, of these "scamfluencers"—his posts are often flagged by cybersecurity researchers who track the Yahoo Boys.

"I'm going to be teaching you guys exactly how to make a fake video call in this video," Format Boy says at the start of his most popular YouTube video. Dramatic music blares as a deepfake video call is made onscreen. A brief text banner says it's for educational purposes only. Six of Format Boy's most popular videos, in fact, are all about creating deepfakes, with others detailing how Yahoo Boy scams work. "Fake video calls are very important," he says in a voice note on Telegram. "Sometimes your clients cannot release some information to you without seeing you physically, without seeing you on camera."

Format Boy started working around 2019, using a cheap phone to spam potential victims on dating sites. From there he got into the business of teaching people his methods and selling them software, guides, and tools. But on the phone with me, Format Boy is quick to distance himself from scamming. "It's not something I really do personally," he says, a claim he repeats multiple times, although he concedes he has at least some hands-on experience. "At some point I was doing it, but I eventually stopped, and I started doing ... I went into video editing and AI research," he says.

He complains that over the past three years YouTube has removed his channels multiple times, resetting his follower count on each occasion. When pushed, he admits that what he posts online could help people to break the law. "I won't lie to you. That's the truth; it's encouraging them," he says. He's most active on his Telegram channel where he regularly sends messages and rambling voice notes—some up to nine minutes long—to his 15,000 subscribers. His posts give advice on things like how to build up trust with a "client" to gain access to their bank accounts, and recommendations and offers for AI software that Yahoo Boys can use to change their appearance on video calls with potential victims. In one post, he touts a Valentine's Day promotional offer on this deepfake software—reduced from 60,000 Nigerian Naira (about $38) to 15,000 ($9.50).

EXPIRED	TIRED	WIRED
"I bought a Tesla!"	"I bought a Tesla before Elon went crazy."	"I bought a Rivian!"
Watching tentacle porn	Having sex with monsters in VR	Having sex with monsters on DMT
Operas	Soap operas	Pope operas
Buying Alaska	Stealing Greenland	California seceding
Black Mirror	*Black Mirror*	*Black Mirror*

I ask Format Boy how he feels about the impact Yahoo Boys have on their victims. He emphasizes his professional restraint. "I don't teach them everything—even if they pay for it—because I feel like this is not the right thing to do normally," he says. Many people in Nigeria feel that they have little help from the government, he adds. "This is why I teach, just so that they can know that even if they're in the worst place in life, they can try something different for a while."

Format Boy's posts give advice on how to build trust with a "client" to gain access to their bank accounts.

In many of his voice notes on Telegram, Format Boy strikes an optimistic tone. Time is short, he says. Scammers need "determination" to succeed. "If you don't plan well, you will fail well. If you plan well, you will succeed well," he says in one voice note. "When I am giving you guys assignments," he says in another, "I am not trying to play teacher. I'm trying to push you to your next level."

Format Boy, like any influencer, is subject to the vicissitudes of the algorithm. Over the years he has begged for more engagement on his YouTube videos. In voice notes from December 2023, he said someone was pretending to be Format Boy online and had created false accounts. In another from early 2024, he said: "I feel like the stress on YouTube, all these platforms, is too much. I'm resigning." Three days after quitting, he was back posting. But recently, he's been planning his new hustle. His latest move, he tells me, is trading memecoins.

MATT BURGESS *is a senior writer at* WIRED *covering information security, privacy, and data regulation in Europe.*

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BY VICTORIA TURK | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALI CHERKIS

SHARED SECRETS

Psst is building a digital safe to protect tech whistleblowers from recrimination.

AMBER SCORAH KNOWS only too well that powerful stories can change society—and that powerful organizations will try to undermine those who tell them. In 2015, her 3-month-old son Karl died on his first day of day care. Heartbroken and furious that she hadn't been with him, Scorah wrote an op-ed about the poor provision for parental leave in the US; her story helped New York City employees win their fight for improved family leave. In 2019 she wrote a memoir about leaving her tight-knit religion, the Jehovah's Witnesses, that exposed issues within the secretive organization. The book cost her friends and family members, but she heard from many people who had also been questioning some of the religion's controversial practices.

Then, while working at a media outlet that connects whistleblowers with journalists, she noticed parallels in the coercive tactics used by groups trying to suppress information. "There is a sort of playbook that powerful entities seem to use over and over again," she says. "You expose something about the powerful, they try to discredit you, people in your community may ostracize you."

In September 2024, Scorah cofounded Psst, a nonprofit that helps people in the tech industry or the government share information of public interest with extra protections—with lots of options for specifying how the information gets used and how anonymous a person stays.

Psst's main offering is a "digital safe"—which users access through an anonymous end-to-end encrypted text box hosted on Psst.org, where they can enter a description of their concerns. (It accepts text entries only and not document uploads, to make it harder for organizations to find the source of leaks.)

What makes Psst unique is something it calls its "information escrow" system—users have the option to keep their submission private until someone else shares similar concerns about the same company or organization.

As the organization was preparing to launch, members of Psst's team helped a group of Microsoft employees who were unhappy with how the company was marketing its AI products to fossil-fuel

← Psst cofounder Amber Scorah wants the nonprofit to surface stories that force big tech to change.

identity of anonymous whistleblowers by making it harder to pinpoint the source of a leak. And it may allow more information to reach daylight, as it encourages people to share what they know even if they don't have the full story.

Only members of Psst's in-house legal team can access information in the safe. In countries including the US and UK, communications between lawyers and their clients usually benefit from legal privilege, meaning the information is kept confidential.

This is one reason tech companies have such large legal departments, says Gibson, who leads Psst's in-house legal team: "They're designed to put lawyers in the room so the information isn't disclosable. To some extent, we're using their playbook."

At the moment, Psst lawyers first manually review the entries in the safe without reading the contents. Users can tag their entries with the company name and the category of their concern—"trust and safety" or "fraud," for instance. If the lawyers find matches, and the contributor consents, the lawyers decrypt and read the entries to see if they may form part of the same story, while keeping the different contributors' identities protected from one another.

Psst plans to automate some of this process—in the future an algorithm running in a secure enclave built into the hardware of a computer will decrypt and compare information looking for potential matches while keeping it shielded from human eyes.

What happens next depends on various factors, but often Psst will involve an independent investigative journalist or publish accounts on its own website. Sometimes, whistleblowers might want to alert regulators without going public.

One challenge, Gibson says, is that regulation often lags behind technological advances, as with AI safety. "You're then in this no-man's-land," she says—even if something's not illegal, reporting it may be in the public interest.

Scorah hopes Psst's impact on the tech world will be similar to what she experienced when telling her own stories, by using insiders' accounts to shed light on broader industry issues. "Whether it's a religion operating off the radar with policies that cause harm or an AI company whose product or policies are causing harm, I have seen the same thing," she says. "Sunlight has a sanitizing effect."

"There is a playbook that powerful entities seem to use over and over again. They try to discredit you."

companies. Only one employee was willing to speak publicly, but others provided supporting documents anonymously. With help from Psst's team of lawyers, the workers filed a complaint with the Securities and Exchange Commission against the company and aired their concerns in a story published by The Atlantic.

Combining reports from multiple sources defends against some of the isolating effects of whistleblowing and makes it harder for companies to write off a story as the grievance of a disgruntled employee, says Psst cofounder Jennifer Gibson. It also helps protect the

VICTORIA TURK *is a technology writer based in London and a former features director at* WIRED UK *and Rest of World.*

JACQUI VANLIEW. READOUT SOURCES: SOUTH KOREAN NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE SERVICE. STORY ON PAGE 80; *PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF COLORADO V. GAVIN SEYMOUR.* STORY ON PAGE 46; *UNITED STATES OF AMERICA V. MICHAEL SMITH.* STORY ON PAGE 54; *THE SPIRIT MOLECULE.* BY RICK STRASSMAN. STORY ON PAGE 32

Readout
The world, quantified.

8,400

Estimated number of people working for North Korea's cyber divisions globally in 2024, including military hackers, crypto thieves, and fake IT workers.

61

Google searches for a Colorado address in the 15 days before the family living there was killed in an arson attack, according to a "reverse keyword search" warrant filed by police.

5M

Files the US government has produced in its case against Michael Smith, who is accused of defrauding music streaming platforms of $10 million using AI-generated tracks. (Smith has pleaded not guilty.)

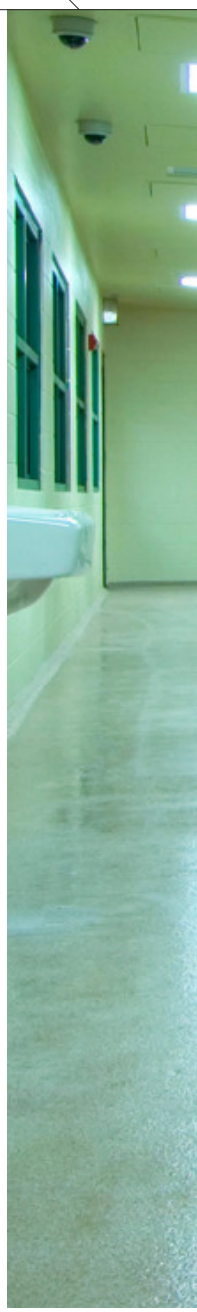
3 feet

Estimated height of a hyperintelligent Gumby that one test subject reported seeing while on the psychedelic drug DMT. (More common "entities" include aliens, elves, insectoids, reptilians, and clowns.)

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE CONVICTED

From Sam Bankman-Fried's fraud-ridden crypto empire to Elizabeth Holmes' sham biotech company to deepfakers on the internet bilking grandmas of their retirement savings, white-collar crime seems to touch every last corner of tech. For the business titan who may one day end up in custody and can't count on a presidential pardon, it never hurts to know a guy.

WIRED spoke with a self-described former "troubleshooter for the mafia" who was incarcerated in US penitentiaries for a decade and found a new role for himself on the outside: He became a prison consultant. Now he works with an array of white-collar offenders. He berates and curses the ears off his clients—but it's all part of the no-bullshit approach he says he uses to help them reduce and optimize their time inside.



GETTY IMAGES

ONCE WHEN I was in prison and we were walking out of the dining hall, I stopped and I looked out the window. I said, "Do you see it?" And the other inmates are like, "What?" I go, "It's right there." And they're stopping and gazing into the sky. Then more people come out of the dining hall and start looking too, and before you know it, so do the correctional officers. Finally, I said: "Gee, see how easy it is to take control of stupid people?"

I had a prison psychiatrist say that I treated the prison system like it was my own personal amusement park. I was just having too good of a time in there. I would get on the telephone, calling home or whoever, and I'd go, "Well, if the staff hates me right now, they're going to despise me by this weekend. I have something special planned. I really can't say. The staff's listening in on the phone calls." So the weekend rolls around, they put extra staff members on duty, wondering, "All right, what's the dude going to do?" I'm lying in my fucking bunk reading a book. I ain't going to do shit. But I fucking manipulated these people.

I also spent my time helping people. I would help people who were over-sentenced on their charges get into RDAP, the Residential Drug Abuse Program, or an extra halfway house called the Second Chance Act program. I would go through their legal paperwork and say, "You know what? Let's file in court on this," and boom, all of a sudden somebody gets resentenced. That made me a folk hero. I thought, "Well shit, I could turn this into a business."

When I first got out of custody, there was nobody doing this. My primary clients were people that had financial fraud. Some drug clients, but it was people who ripped people off. Your white-collar offenders. It's people who are scared, angry, and confused. If they reach out to me before they've gone in, I can get them prepared.

Between people on the outside and people on the inside, I may have like 50 clients, maybe 100, at a time. Sometimes my services are free, sometimes they're $3,500, $5,000, $10,000. I even had one guy pay me $50,000. It just depends on the person, their circumstance, what they can afford. I've got four other people who work with me, two women and two men.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHANNA GOODMAN

When my clients come to me, I tell them: "OK, so shut the fuck up and listen to what I have to say. You're in deep shit. I'm going to pull your head out of your ass, because your lawyer probably screwed you, made you false fucking promises that they can't keep. First let's take a look at your charges, your federal indictment. What are you charged with? Is it drugs? Is it some type of wire fraud?" And we'll just break your case down.

I'm not a lawyer. I can't give you legal advice. But what I can do is explain the law to you, and I can help you determine whether or not you should go to trial or take a plea agreement. I also teach my clients how to lie on the witness stand effectively, how to beat the polygraph machine. So I'm a full-service kind of business.

I got hit with narcotics trafficking, securities fraud, racketeering, obstruction of justice, and possession of machine guns. I'm not here to fucking judge anybody. I know within five minutes of seeing the indictment whether this person's going to prison. There's no question about it, unless they're ratting people out.

So a dumbass gets sentenced. I have a chemical dependency assessment done on them to determine whether they have a substance abuse issue. If I have a report generated for them and it gets put into their probation report at sentencing and they submit it to the prison, it creates eligibility for them to get into a program to get out up to one year early.

I explain to them it's not what they've seen on TV. I hold their hand and their family's hand, because their families are busy watching prison shows and they're all freaked out. I calm them down. Prison is boring. It's Groundhog Day. Every day is the last day, unless people get into a fight or something. I explain to them the different types of prisons. A majority of my clients go to minimum security institutions, known as federal prison camps. Many have no fences, no walls. They often don't lock the doors.

I'm teaching my clients the politics of prison life—how to deal with staff, how to deal with other inmates. You don't want to hang out with informants or child molesters. And some of the staff members are fucking cuckoo. They're unprofessional. They're not well trained. They have their own emotional and personal issues.

I give people that psychological peace of mind. I have a lot of clients that are family members of people in custody. I'm like a cross between a marriage counselor, a psychologist, a life coach, and a priest. So that calms the people.

My wife said that I need to be nicer to the clients. I think maybe I'm desensitized because I've been doing this shit for so long. I get frustrated. I sometimes go off on people. I say, "I don't know who's dumber, you or a fucking lawyer, listen the fuck up." I mean, my ex-wife said I didn't have one ounce of human kindness. She knew me the best.

As told to **ELANA KLEIN**, WIRED*'s editorial assistant.*

BY ANDY GREENBERG | 3D RENDERS BY DEFCAD

2012

HAVEBLUE AR-15 LOWER RECEIVER

A blogger called Haveblue posts to his website that he has used a Stratasys 3D printer to make the lower receiver of an AR-15. The plastic part works—at least for a few rounds.

2013

LIBERATOR

DIY gunmaker Cody Wilson releases a design for the first fully 3D-printable, single-round handgun, naming it for the one-shot pistols Allies air-dropped behind enemy lines in World War II.

2014

IMURA ZIGZAG

27-year-old Yoshitomo Imura is arrested in Kawasaki, Japan, with a collection of plastic guns including the ZigZag, a 3D-printed, six-shot revolver of his own design.

2015

SONGBIRD

Engineering student James Patrick releases a CAD file of a fully 3D-printed pistol that's more reliable than the Liberator and more closely resembles a traditional handgun. "The first legitimately scary 3D-printed gun," Wilson calls it. (He means it as a compliment.)

2017

AP-9

A digital gunsmith known as Derwood releases a new hybrid specimen, a partially printed semiautomatic with a metal bolt and barrel that accepts a standard magazine of ammunition rather than individual rounds.

2019

FMDA

A 3D-printed-gun designer going by the name Free Men Don't Ask, or FMDA, releases a printable Glock-style frame designed to be combined with commercial Glock parts. The FMDA model, as it would come to be known, is soon one of the most popular ways to 3D-print an untraceable handgun.

GHOST GUNS OF PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

It's never been easier to print an unregulated, untraceable deadly weapon.

TEN YEARS AGO this summer, in a quiet back room of WIRED's headquarters, I made an AR-15 "ghost gun": an untraceable, semiautomatic rifle with no serial number, created in near-total privacy, fully outside of America's system of gun control. More specifically, I made the gun's lower receiver, the body of that rifle and the only part of it that's treated as an actual firearm under US law. Fabricate that one relatively simple piece yourself with a power drill, a 3D printer, or a CNC milling machine—I tried all three—order the rest of the components online, and you've built

2021

FMDA DD-19.2

A 3D-printed-gun group known as the Gatalog releases a more practical version of the FMDA on its website with premade, commercially available metal rails for the slide that sits on top of the frame—so practical that Luigi Mangione would allegedly use a variant of one in the New York murder of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson.

2020

FGC-9

Pseudonymous gunsmith Jstark1809 revises the AP-9 to create a reliable, mostly printable semiautomatic with no commercial gun parts. The first truly global ghost gun, it's been adopted by neo-Nazis, Irish republicans, and Myanmar rebels fighting the country's military junta.

2024

FTN SUPPRESSORS

A designer named pla.boi releases files for printable silencers designed to be wrapped in a carbon fiber tube and hockey tape for reinforcement. Mangione allegedly screwed one onto the muzzle of the gun he used to kill Thompson.

HOFFMAN AR-15 LOWER

Gunmaker Hoffman Tactical releases a model for a far more durable 3D-printable AR-15 with a wing of plastic reinforcement on the component the stock screws into, which often broke in previous models.

2021

2024

URUTAU

A gun designer who goes by the name Joseph the Parrot releases the Urutau, a revamp of the FGC-9 that uses a "bullpup" design to create a more compact rifle with a longer barrel for better accuracy, the most futuristic 3D-printed gun to date.

PLASTIKOV

In another milestone for globalized ghost guns, Gunsmith IvanTheTroll releases the first viable, printable lower receiver for a variant of an AK-47, a rifle whose components are some of the most ubiquitous in the world outside the US.

2020

ORCA

Hoffman Tactical releases a model of an AR-15 with as many 3D-printed components as possible, including the barrel nut, upper and lower receiver, hand guard, and stock.

2023

your own very deadly weapon without encountering any regulation whatsoever.

In the decade since then, gun control laws and DIY weapon makers have been caught in a cat-and-mouse game with no apparent end: A Supreme Court decision in March upheld a Biden-era ban on some "kits" that let anyone create a ghost gun in less than an hour with simple power tools, and state laws in New York, New Jersey, California, and elsewhere would now make my experiment in a San Francisco office illegal. But thanks to advances in digital fabrication tech, making an untraceable, homemade gun in the privacy of your home is still remarkably easy in much of the rest of the US—easy enough that when 26-year-old Luigi Mangione allegedly decided to kill UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson last December, police photos of his weapon suggest he chose to do it with a partially 3D-printed Glock-style firearm, even using a 3D-printed suppressor for added stealth.

So in an effort to see how much things have changed in the world of ghost guns over the past 10 years, we at WIRED attempted to 3D-print and assemble the exact ghost gun allegedly used by Mangione. It turned out to still be disturbingly doable—and legal. You can watch the full process in our video at WIRED.com/video.

The 3D-printable gun frame allegedly used by Mangione, it turns out, debuted in 2021, years before he was found with that weapon, and digital gunsmiths say it's far from state-of-the-art. To capture just how far printed, plastic weaponry has evolved before and since that crime, here's a timeline of 3D-printed firearms, starting with the dawn of this digital threat to gun control laws. W

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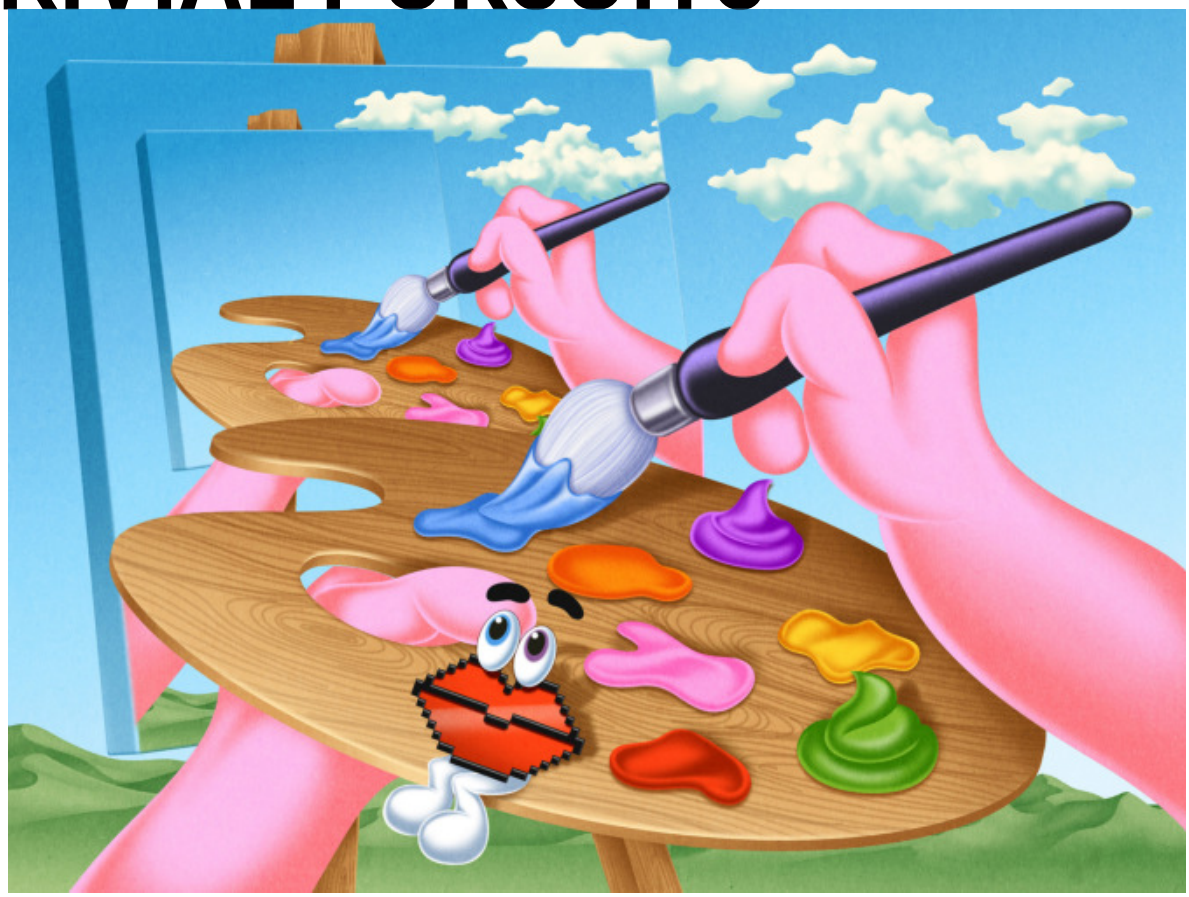
TRIVIAL PURSUITS



Esoteric programming languages are fun! Until they're derivative nonsense and kill the joke.

SOME PROGRAMMING LANGUAGES helped send humans to the moon, some are cooking up new leukemia drugs, and some exist just to fuck with you. Brainfuck is a minimalist "esoteric language," or "esolang," made up of just eight non-alphabetic characters. Esolangs are experimental, jokey, and intentionally hard-to-use languages created to push the boundaries of code (and your buttons). In Brainfuck, part of the basic "Hello, World" program looks like `.<-.<.+++.------.---`, which makes any normal person want to say "Goodbye, World."

Most esolangs don't even look like computer code at all. Here's one way to print "HI" in the Shakespeare Programming Language:

```
ALL THE WORLD'S A PROGRAM.

HAMLET, A MELANCHOLY PRINCE.
OPHELIA, THE VOICE OF THE MACHINE.

ACT: 1.
SCENE: 1.

[ENTER HAMLET AND OPHELIA]

OPHELIA: YOU ARE AS SWEET AS THE SUM
OF A BEAUTIFUL HONEST HANDSOME BRAVE
PEACEFUL NOBLE LORD AND A HAPPY GEN-
TLE GOLDEN KING. SPEAK YOUR MIND!

HAMLET: YOU ARE AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE
SUM OF BLOSSOMING LOVELY FINE CUTE
PRETTY SUNNY SUMMER'S DAY AND A
DELICIOUS SWEET DELICIOUS ROSE. YOU
ARE AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE SUM OF THY-
SELF AND A FLOWER. SPEAK YOUR MIND!

[EXEUNT]
```

Basically, Hamlet and Ophelia are "variables" to which numerical values get assigned. The nouns "Lord" and "King" each have a value of +1, and adjectives such as "sweet" and "beautiful" act as multipliers, producing numbers that correspond to ASCII characters—"H" for Hamlet and "I" for Ophelia. "Speak your mind!" prints them.

Esolangs can get even more unhinged than that. On the Esolang Wiki, you'll find a list of at least 6,000 of these screwball languages and counting. As a Korean, I'm amused by !한국어, an esolang that requires programs to be written in grammatically correct Korean. Then there's Whitespace, an invisible language made up of things like spaces and tabs. If you're craving more color, there's Piet (as in

Mondrian), whose "code" is composed of 20 colors arranged on a grid, producing programs that look like abstract paintings. Some esolangs are even "Turing-complete," meaning they can theoretically do everything that more responsible languages like C++ or Python can (much like how you could, in theory, use a letter opener instead of a sushi knife to prepare a 12-course omakase).

But taken together, you start to wonder what all these brainfucks are good for. Playing around with them is at once amusing and irritating, inundated as you are with countless clones, minor rule variations on existing languages (like Whitespace but with parentheses), and languages created just for the profane hell of it. In her book *Theory of the Gimmick*, the literary critic Sianne Ngai says that gimmicks—everything from Duchamp's *Fountain* to Google Glass—are "working too little but also working too hard." They put in minimal effort but beg to be noticed. All in all, gimmicks can be "labor-saving" cheats that skip the hard work needed to create something with real substance.

So: Are esolangs gimmicks?

WE PROGRAMMERS HAVE always been sickos, so it's not surprising that esolangs emerged early in our history. In 1972, two Princeton students, Donald Woods and James Lyon, created the Compiler Language With No Pronounceable Acronym, or INTERCAL (naturally). It remains one of the most fully fleshed-out esolangs around, with a 20-page reference manual—a parody of IBM documentation—laced with comedy and sadism. INTERCAL complains if you don't include enough instances of the keyword PLEASE, but it also rejects programs if you use the word too much. You terminate a program with PLEASE GIVE UP.

When prodded over the years by interviewers intent on teasing out some grand vision or high-concept inspiration behind INTERCAL's creation, Woods has always insisted: There wasn't one. He and Lyon did it for the lulz. But some programmers still succumb to the impulse to cast their work in elevated terms. They're given to producing sentences like one found in The Journal of Objectless Art, where an esolang designer, after declaring esolangs an "art form," describes them as "programming lanauges [sic] which 'shift attention from command and control toward cultural expression and refusal.'" He cites Brainfuck as an example that "destabilizes the authority of the machine by making computer logic available to the programmer in a very straightforward way, but refusing to ease the boundary between human expression and assembly code and thereby taking us on a ludicrous journey of logic."

This is just theory babble—not even of the memorable kind. Phrases like "algorithmic unconscious" and "haunting patterns of alien logic," which appear in the same essay, are pomospeak posing as insight. I'm a little skeptical of those who overtheorize the aesthetics of code or self-anoint as programmer-artists—not because I reject the concept, but because the bar is so achingly low. Frivolous works abound in this marketplace of digital 1em0ns.

To me, esolangs seem born of a kind of monomania. This peculiar malady, in controlled settings, might beget *Finnegans Wake* or the zany experiments of the Oulipo group of writers and mathematicians. But misapplied, monomania becomes what the philosopher Daniel Dennett called "chmess"—a game identical to chess, except the king moves two squares in any direction instead of one. Like chess, chmess can generate endless dissertations and academic papers. It has all the trappings of intellectual depth, but at some point, you must ask: Why am I thinking about a game that no one actually plays? Is there any genuine invention here, or just a predictable variation on a theme?

Riding the coattails of the inventive weirdness of INTERCAL or Piet, many newer esolangs try to achieve esotericism by imitation—and end up producing nothing more than aimless technical obfuscation. One of Oulipo's most prominent achievements is Georges Perec's *La Disparition*, a novel composed entirely without the letter *e*—a formal constraint that, in lesser hands, could have resulted in gimmicky nonsense but instead yielded an oddly moving masterpiece. Esolangs that feel like limp facsimiles are not unlike knockoff lipogrammatic novels that choose to drop some other letter.

STILL, ONCE IN a while, you stumble on an esolang that reminds you that not every experimental enterprise traffics in mere cleverness. Among the recent standouts is Martin Ender's Alice, where the direction of execution changes based on slashes—/ and \—which behave like mirrors, refracting the flow of logic like beams of light and sending the program's execution ricocheting in different directions. Weirdly elegant, it works when it shouldn't.

Another imaginative offering is Ender's Hexagony, a 2D esolang where the code runs on a hexagonal grid. Inspired by an earlier classic called Befunge (the first 2D esolang with a rectangular grid), Hexagony isn't just a variation with cosmetic tweaks but pulls off a tricky technical challenge in getting control flow and memory to behave coherently within a hexagonally structured source code.

As I was playing with the mesmerizing Hexagony online playground, I was reminded of what Roger Ebert—who wasn't a fan of David Lynch's earlier films—said of *Mulholland Drive*: "At last his experiment doesn't shatter the test tubes." Every now and then, amid the wreckage of broken flasks in the esolang lab, a hacker channels their monomania into finding novel ways to contort the compiler. A gimmick? Probably. But the kind I'll gladly surrender to, if only for that sick pleasure of watching a genius-pervert at work in the joyful abuse of the computer. W

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BY KATE KNIBBS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOVELLE TAMAY

The Sky-High Ambitions of Jay Graber

Bluesky is where all the lefties went in the wake of Musk's Twitter takeover. But its CEO says the app is for everyone—and could revolutionize the social internet.

AS I WAITED to meet with Jay Graber, the CEO of Bluesky, on the 25th floor of an office building in downtown Seattle, I stared out at the city's waterfront and thought: *God fucking damn it*. Stretching in every direction was a wall of dense, gray, tragically boring fog. And here I was about to interview the head of a social platform named after good weather. On camera, no less.

Then something miraculous happened. Moments before Graber showed up, the haze lifted. Elliott Bay glittered in the sun. I could see past Bainbridge Island's rolling hills all the way to a snow-capped peak, and the skies were, yup, completely and totally blue.

Graber's tenure at Bluesky has had this felicitous quality, starting with her given name, Lantian, which—in a triumph for the nominative determinism crowd—means "blue sky" in Mandarin. (That the name she's gone by for years, Jay, can also mean a winged creature that takes to the skies adds to the serendipity.) When Graber joined Bluesky in 2019, it was an experiment within Twitter. The idea was to spin off a social platform that would give users more control. That happened when Bluesky launched as an invite-only service in 2023, and by the time it opened up to the general public a year later, Twitter had become the right-wing echo chamber known as X. Bluesky swiftly became a refuge for a coalition of leftists, liberals, and never-Trumpers.

The 34-year-old chief executive cuts a different figure than most social media bosses. Earlier this year, after Mark Zuckerberg wore a shirt winking at his king-like status at Meta, Graber donned a near-identical top that instead called for a world without kings. The sartorial rebuttal was good press (and Bluesky ended up making major dough selling the shirt) but also reflects her idea that this project ultimately cannot be controlled by a single leader.

Indeed, Graber, a former software engineer, seems most energized when she's talking about the unique infrastructure for her kingless world. Undergirding Bluesky as well as several smaller apps is the Atmosphere, or AT Protocol, which is a rule book that servers use to communicate. The open-source protocol allows sovereign digital spaces to integrate with one another as needed. Two apps with complementary ideas about moderation or ads can work in tandem—or not. It's up to them.

Graber sees Atmosphere as nothing less than the democratized future of the social internet, and she emphasizes to me that developers are actively building new projects with it. In her dreams, these projects are as big, if not bigger, than Bluesky. Her ambitions might not be kingly, in other words, but they are lofty. For now, call Graber an insurgent go-getter—on whom the sun still shines.

When we talked a few months ago, Bluesky had surpassed 25 million users. Where are you today?
34.6 million users.

What's your day-to-day like right now?
A lot of hiring. We're getting ready to make this a larger social experience for more people, both within the Bluesky app and outside it.

How many people have you hired?
In November, during our growth spurt, we were around 20. Now we're at 25, and we'll probably pass 30 soon. We're growing at a pace that's sustainable to us.

What milestones are you hoping to hit by the end of 2025?
Some of the features we've been talking about for a long time, like communities and verification, we're really excited about. Verification is the most fleshed-out. We're doing it in stages. [*Days after we spoke, Bluesky rolled out tools to help users authenticate their identity and discourage impersonators.*]

Tell me about the communities feature.
A lot of people don't realize that Bluesky is a bit like Reddit and Twitter at the same time, because you can build feeds that are essentially communities—the science feed is run by scientists, is moderated by scientists, and has its own rules. But right now you have to go outside the app to do it. Third-party services, like SkyFeed or Graze, let you create feeds.

So you can create and monitor many feeds in one interface, but it's a separate app. Are you building this capability into Bluesky itself?
We've talked to people who are running these feeds, and they would like better tooling for making these into communities *within* the Bluesky app. So that's the big idea: making it easier to create and run a custom feed.

Any timeline for when that's coming?
The end of the year.

Let's back up. How did you end up starting a decentralized social platform?
In college, I had this major—science, technology, and society—that was very

interdisciplinary. I studied virtual currencies and thought that they were going to be disruptive, so I was interested in getting involved in that. I worked on Zcash, a cryptocurrency that combined decentralized technology with privacy technology. I like seeing a new technology emerging, and asking, *What can you do with this*? After a few years, I realized you could build better social networks that weren't on a blockchain but use some of those components. I started researching and building decentralized social stuff. Then, when Jack Dorsey announced in 2019 that Twitter was working on a decentralized protocol, I was already considered an expert in the space.

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I always thought Bluesky started as a skunkworks within Twitter.
It was a skunkworks but with outside contributors. I was a contractor. I wanted independence, because old Twitter moved slowly. Jack Dorsey was our biggest champion, but then Elon Musk said that he was going to buy Twitter, and that threw off everything—no new projects were going to get shipped, especially not something as ambitious as Bluesky. That's when we started thinking that we should experiment with building our own app.

You mentioned your crypto background. Bluesky's largest investor is a venture capital firm that specializes in crypto. Does Bluesky have more in common with a crypto startup than one might think?
Well, the term Web3 got very associated with cryptocurrency, so it's not a good word to use for what we're doing. But if you think about Web3 as evolving the social Web 2.0, that kind of *is* what we're doing. We're evolving social media that was based in centralized companies into something that is open and distributed. That was a goal underlying the Web3 movement—we just didn't build on that technical foundation of a blockchain. You can achieve a lot of the same things using open web principles and more Web 1.0 kinds of technology. Our identity system lets you use a domain name as your username, so you can have wired.com in your username. That's just a web 1.0 technology brought into the social media sphere. I think our investors saw that vision, and they're excited about building out the broader developer ecosystem. We want investors who care about seeing this entire world of social media come to life, not just Bluesky.

Bluesky users can now post videos. A lot of people already consider Bluesky an X competitor. Are you gunning for TikTok too?
We're built on an open protocol, and other apps are starting to fill in these open spaces. An app called Skylight is more of a straight TikTok alternative. It lets you post short-form videos, and you can edit them in the app. Bluesky has videos, but it's more secondary. The great thing about an open protocol is that you

can move from Bluesky over to Skylight and keep your followers. So they go with you across applications.

How does that work?
Say you download Skylight from the app store—you can log in with your Bluesky username, if you want. Then you have the same followers, and the photos or videos that you post to Skylight can also show up in Bluesky and vice versa.

Did the Bluesky team have anything to do with the development of Skylight, or is it totally separate?
Totally separate.

What are your relationships like with the people developing other apps on the protocol?
There was recently the Atmosphere Conference, and we met a lot of folks there building apps we didn't know about. There are private messengers, new moderation tools. The benefit to developers of an open ecosystem is that you don't have to start from zero each time. You have 34.6 million users to tap into.

When you're talking about this new ecosystem of applications, is the idea that you're the CEO of all of this, or just Bluesky?
I am just the CEO of Bluesky Social. We have built out the protocol, and we maintain the Bluesky app, but the protocol is going to take on a life of its own. Pieces of it are going to be standardized, pieces of it are going to be stewarded by the community, and it's going to evolve in different directions as new people shape it.

If one of these apps were to blow up and surpass Bluesky, would it help or hurt your business?
It would help us—because these are shared backends, if you recall.

Let's say that the video app, Skylight, goes megaviral. How does that shared backend become relevant?
That means you can view all those videos on Bluesky too. It'd probably change the way that people interact on Bluesky, because all this content would be coming in from another application. Also, one of the pathways to monetization we've mentioned is developer services.

How do you plan to make money?
Subscriptions are coming soon. The next steps are to look into what marketplaces can span these different applications. Other apps in the ecosystem are experimenting with sponsored posts and things like that. I think ads eventually, in some form, work their way in, but we're not going to do ads the way traditional social apps did. We'll let people experiment and see what comes out of it.

There's been an influx of big creators onto Bluesky, but there's no direct way for them to monetize their work yet. Are you going to change that?
We're giving them great traffic—and that can convert to money. One big thing is we don't downrank links, so if you are a YouTube creator or you have a Patreon and you post those links on Bluesky, you're getting higher link traffic, even with a smaller follower count. This is true of small creators and even news organizations. We've heard from large news organizations that Bluesky has better click-throughs and better subscription rates. [WIRED *can vouch for this: The platform has become a top traffic driver and source of new subscribers.*]

Democratic Party stars like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have also joined Bluesky. Are you doing anything to court celebrities and influencers?
We're doing some community outreach. We're seeing a lot of growth in sectors with maybe not as big celebrities but a lot of traction, like sports media. The sports reporter Mina Kimes came on and created a starter pack, which got a lot of followers very quickly. We have game devs, we have sports, we have science.

Would you welcome President Trump?
Yeah—Bluesky's for everyone, and we think that over time, the broader public conversation needs to be on an open protocol. That lets people choose their own moderation preferences. We think that it's flexible enough to serve every use case and everyone.

We're in this moment when free speech is under threat. How do you think about that?
I think building on an open protocol is the most enduring foundation for speech. We're creating a digital commons of user data where you get to control your identity and your data. We're building infrastructure that I hope stays around for a long time. Bluesky, the app, is just one site where speech can happen.

This is like the web itself. Early on, we had AOL, and accessing the internet happened through AOL. If the AOL web portal wasn't showing you something, it would be a lot harder to find. Then more browsers came along, and these linked you out to the broader internet. Now anyone can put up a blog and host their own views online. There's larger websites if you want, Substack or Medium, but you can also self-host. This is the kind of ecosystem we're building, where anyone can self-host. And then the question of "freedom of speech, not reach" is made very

tangible. The Mediums of the world get to choose their moderation rules, but if individuals are unhappy with that, they can start a new site or host their own blog.

What does "freedom of speech, not freedom of reach" mean to you?
Early on, we basically embedded freedom of speech into the protocol. Anyone can do the equivalent of standing up a new blog. Then sites like Bluesky get to decide how to prioritize reach.

And "reach" here means how Bluesky spreads—or doesn't spread—your posts. So people can say what they want, but they have to live with how Bluesky moderates their words?
If you want to change the rules, you can build your own thing or find another space that serves you. Within the parameters of Bluesky, we're setting the rules.

With your interest in decentralized spaces, I'm curious what you think about decentralized or "network" states, which are, in theory, startup countries—a bunch of like-minded people who met online and bought up land together, for example. Are you following the network state movement?
We'll have a lot of trial and error to develop good governance in the digital sphere, so maybe much farther down the road that might translate into the real world. In part I see what we're doing as building civic infrastructure in digital form. Social media is how we get our news, it's how we get informed, and if you can make control of that democratic, pluralistic, and open, I think that will translate down the road to more democratic social structures.

"Nobody is fully grasping that this is potentially the last social identity you have to create."

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Check out the video on WIRED's YouTube channel.

How do you balance wanting to provide civic infrastructure with being the CEO of a for-profit company?
We're running a lot of infrastructure that serves other apps in the network, and I think that is very financially valuable long-term. Early in the history of the web, you had these internet protocols that didn't have monetization baked in, but it meant anyone could spin up a website. Then the people who built the search engines and browsers to access the new web were ultimately very big companies.

Are you still working toward any ambitions from when you started in 2019—or are there any that now seem impossible?
Yes. Right now, Bluesky feels like Twitter, Flashes like Instagram, Skylight like TikTok. But you can build or combine things in totally new ways, or build social experiences that aren't necessarily large mainstream social apps. Those kinds of experiences are what I'm excited to see unleashed. The long-term vision is not just for a new form of social apps but a new layer for the web—what Web3 aspired to be, without the blockchain.

I'm having a flashback to a conversation I had a decade ago. The Internet Archive's founder, Brewster Kahle, talked about reinventing the web in a similar way.
I got my first open-source crypto job, at Zcash, through the Internet Archive's Decentralized Web summit. That was one of the places where I got my first insight into all the folks building things in the decentralized web space.

I wrote about the Internet Archive's legal struggles last year. Some groups in the book world fiercely support its digital lending; others fiercely oppose it. I see a similar tension brewing among Bluesky power users. Some people want the app to be more active in content moderation, but that seems to clash with the principles of decentralization, where ideally no one body can ban or block people. Do you see this as a problem for Bluesky?
There are always going to be conflicts when one person's idea of a good time online conflicts with somebody else's. People have different ideas about safety. Every space needs some moderation. The goal of building an open ecosystem is to support the coexistence of people with different points of view. They don't all have to be in the same room, abiding by the same rules. Maybe they can be in adjacent rooms, or maybe it's like two hotel buildings that are linked.

At the end of the day, we set some parameters of what we think acceptable behavior is on Bluesky, and if you disagree with those you can branch off and build another application adjacent to it.

What is your relationship with Jack Dorsey like now?
Jack isn't involved anymore. He had a portfolio approach to decentralized technologies, and early on he helped several projects get off the ground. He funded another distributed protocol that I think today he probably prefers, Nostr, which shares many architectural similarities to Bluesky, but it works more like a cryptocurrency wallet. You need keys. You have to be a bit more sophisticated as a user.

What's your pitch for why people should join Bluesky?
It's a great time to shape the culture and the future of Bluesky. The people who have created starter packs, created feeds, and gotten involved in the community have seen a lot of growth—even if they previously weren't big posters elsewhere. For creators, nobody is fully grasping that this is potentially the last social identity you have to create. Signing up now isn't just committing to yet another micro-blogging app, it's committing to a new era of social, to having a sort of digital passport that moves with you.

Is there anything else you want people to know about Bluesky?
This is a choose-your-own-adventure game. You can get in there and customize the experience as much as you want. If you're not finding what you want within the Bluesky app, there might be another app within the protocol ecosystem that will give you what you want. If you can't find it, you can build it. You don't get this level of control anywhere else.

EDITED BY JEREMY WHITE | WRITTEN BY CHRIS HASLAM

OBJETS D'EVIL

Villainous characters often have devilishly good taste. Put these tools to better use in your own lair.

Dry Ager DX 1000 Premium S ▶
While Buffalo Bill liked to "store" his victims for later in the bottom of a well, Hannibal Lecter preferred to dig in right then and there (just ask Paul Krendler). But when he demands the most tender possible cuts for his guests, we expect only dry aging will do. This high-class meat fridge combines ancient dry-aging methods with state-of-the-art humidity-controlled technology to take the effort, risk, and odor from hanging meats, all from a plug-and-go appliance. The result is a blackened steak with thick crust—but cut away the exterior and you'll be rewarded with the most tender, buttery piece of meat imaginable.
$ Price on request

PHOTOGRAPHY: LANDIG + LAVA GMBH & CO. KG, DRAGON RIOT, SIRMAN, WÜSTHOF, BIALETTI, REIDEL, GETTY IMAGES

Dragon Riot Poultry Shears
Whether you're looking to spatchcock a chicken, debone a carcass, or neatly remove your own polydactyl finger, these poultry shears will effortlessly cut through gristle and bone. The micro-serrated German stainless steel blades are easy to wield, and the nonslip ergonomic grip and lockable blades prevent unwanted accidents. While they're dishwasher safe, keep in mind that blood stains are easier to remove with cold water. **$26**

Sirman Anniversario LX 350 Trad Flywheel Slicer
Nothing prepares cured meats for the plate as elegantly as this 198-pound instrument of flesh-cleaving perfection. Spin the flywheel on the front to rotate the Sirman's 14-inch blade. The carriage uses a double-articulating arm to hold your prosciutto in place as it glides back and forth across the blade's edge. Despite the Anniversario LX's retro aesthetic, its all-modern design is made for demanding, precision butchery. **$6,294**

Bialetti Mini Express Double Serve Coffee Maker
Mads Mikkelsen's Lecter used a glorious $22,000 Royal coffee maker that sadly doesn't come in red. Try this beautiful and effective stovetop espresso maker from Bialetti. It works like a classic Moka pot, but the collector is replaced by a plate that holds two cups. **$49**

Riedel Amadeo Decanter
That nice Chianti you've paired with liver and fava beans needs to breathe. This hand-blown decanter holds a single bottle of wine in a shape that naturally keeps sediment out of each pour. **$650**

Wüsthof 8-Piece Designer Knife Set
Dr. Lecter enjoyed the versatility of his Spyderco Harpy knife, but when the guests arrive he's going to want something a little less murderous on the kitchen counter. Now available with handles in a red-wine-inspired shade of Tasty Sumac, this classic knife set from Wüsthof features forged stainless steel blades with an edge-preserving Rockwell Hardness Scale rating of 58 and a focused blade grind angle of 29 degrees. Safely store the set in the included oiled ash block. **$880**

Pro-Ject Flatten It ◀
Few people realize the $640 million in negotiable bearer bonds Hans Gruber so desperately wanted was needed to replace all the warped vinyl in his collection. Analog enthusiasts needn't suffer such financial pain: Pro-Ject's vinyl-flattening machine uses two 12-inch hot plates to heat and press any precious-but-warped long players back into shape. It maintains a temperature of 136.4 degrees Fahrenheit and gently irons out those unwanted wobbles. **$999**

Cassina Le Corbusier LC2 ▲
As an iconic Euro villain, Hans Gruber's choice of chair would be as utterly uncompromising as the man himself. Designed by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, and Charlotte Perriand in 1928, the LC2 armchair combines generously proportioned cushions and a tubular chrome frame to create an instantly recognizable piece of furniture. Get it in the classic black Scozia leather shown here. **$7,030**

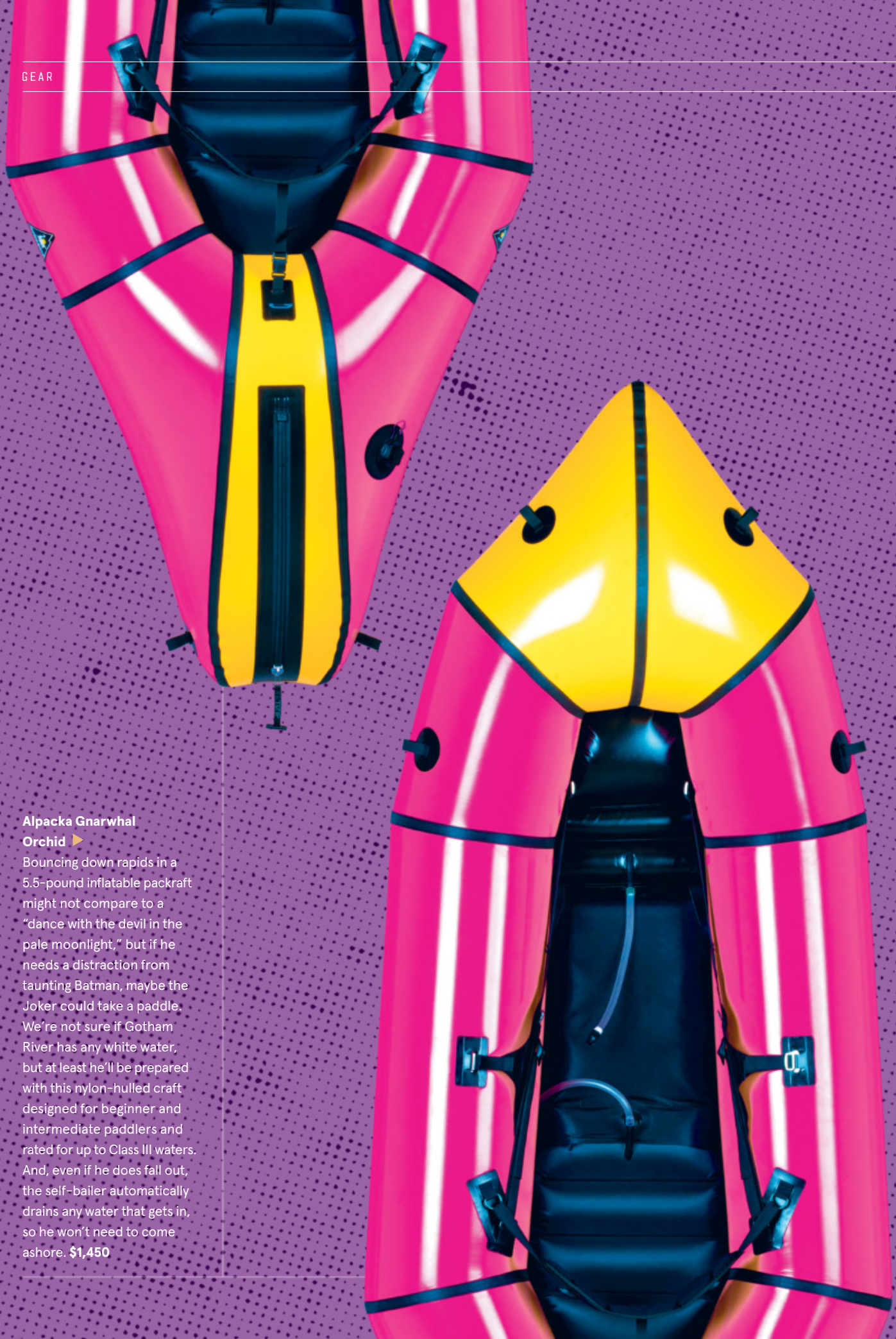
Ecoute Satin Vacuum Tube Headphones ▲
These stylish noise-canceling Bluetooth cans feature the latest digital wizardry, but sonic duties are handled by a built-in vacuum tube preamp that adds a rich analog warmth. **$800**

Vicoustic Multifuser DC3 ▲
Given his proclivities for Bach and semiautomatic weapons, Gruber's apartment could benefit from this audio-dampening diffusion panel. Installation is easy enough for any blond henchman. **$398**

T+A G 2000 R Turntable and R 2500 R Integrated Multi Source Receiver ◀
Hailing from precision German audio engineers T+A, this slick setup is the perfect cold-steel color match for Hans' (and Arafat's) John Phillips suits. The belt-driven turntable has an MC-2 moving coil cartridge and a crystal-controlled synchronous motor for exceptional stability. The matching retro-modern all-in-one also features a CD drive, a multiband radio, a 250-watt-per-channel amp, an optional phono preamp, and the ability to stream just about any digital source with unearthly sound quality. **Turntable $10,780. Receiver $18,880**

PHOTOGRAPHY: PRO-JECT AUDIO SYSTEMS, CASSINA, T+A ELEKTROAKUSTIK, ECOUTE, VICOUSTIC, TRANSPARENT, GETTY IMAGES

Transparent The Brutalist Speaker ◀
Weighing a hefty 26.5 pounds and standing over 23 inches tall, this Brutalist-architecture-inspired speaker is made from 70 percent postconsumer recycled aluminum. Inside, there's a 6.5-inch side-mounted woofer and dual 3-inch tweeters, placed rather strikingly at elevated 90-degree angles. It's a bold audio offering, but with support for hi-res playback of audio sources from Wi-Fi, Bluetooth 5.2, AirPlay 2, Tidal Connect, and Spotify, it would have made the perfect farewell gift for Hans when he was kindly asked to leave Volksfrei, his West German terrorist group. **$4,000**

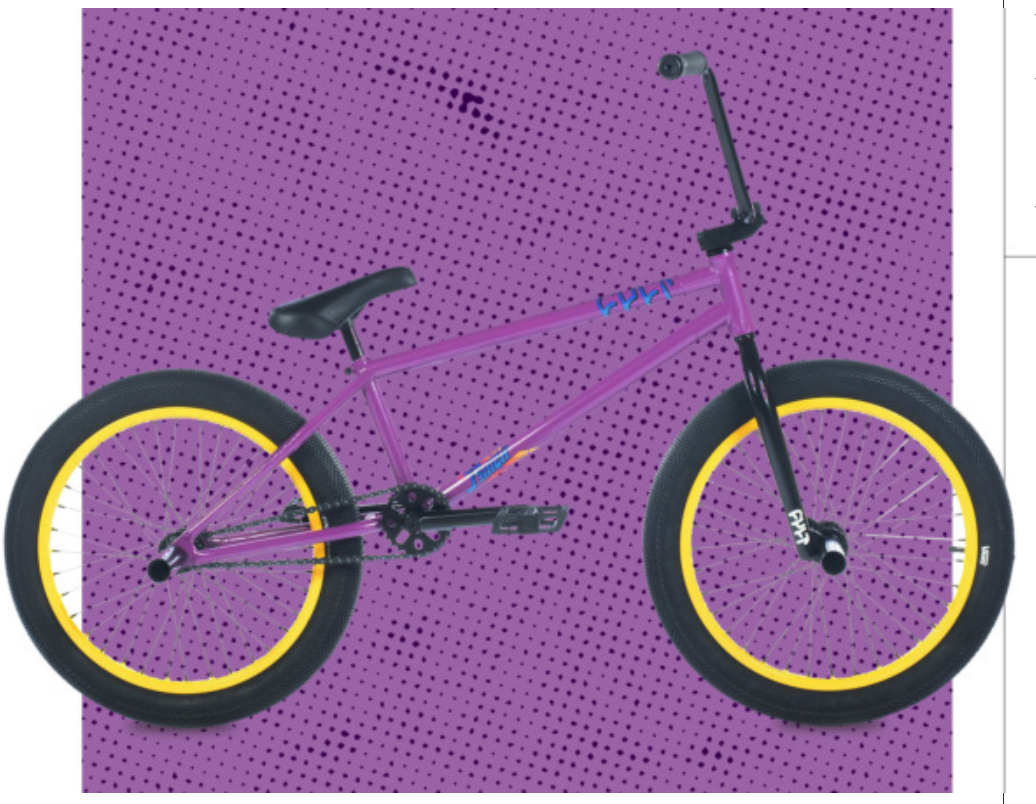


Alpacka Gnarwhal Orchid

Bouncing down rapids in a 5.5-pound inflatable packraft might not compare to a "dance with the devil in the pale moonlight," but if he needs a distraction from taunting Batman, maybe the Joker could take a paddle. We're not sure if Gotham River has any white water, but at least he'll be prepared with this nylon-hulled craft designed for beginner and intermediate paddlers and rated for up to Class III waters. And, even if he does fall out, the self-bailer automatically drains any water that gets in, so he won't need to come ashore. **$1,450**

REBS Grapnel Launcher
The Joker loves his razor-sharp playing cards, acid flowers, and cyanide pies—but he secretly craves just a few of Batman's toys. Now he can join in the wall-scaling fun with the Grapnel Launcher, which can shoot a rope and grappling hook up to 115 feet, or 53 feet with a rope ladder. This device for first responders isn't sold to the public, so he'll have to pull some strings. **$ Price on Request**

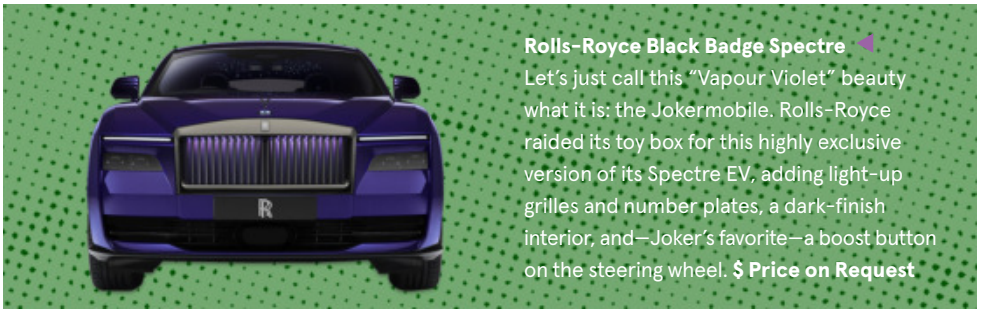
iStyles DJI Mavic Skin
When you really need to get a message out of Arkham Asylum and you can't find a convict willing to have a phone stitched inside them, try a drone like the virtually uncrashable DJI Mavic 3. The Joker can dress up his stock quadcopter with a set of laser-cut, color-matched, UV-resistant, and goo-free stickers from iStyles. **$30**



Cult Devotion BMX
What sport would a fiercely intelligent maniacal lunatic lean toward? With its mix of adrenaline, speed, and high probability of bruising your nether regions, BMX would seem a natural fit. This top-tier ride from Cult Devotion has been designed for street, freestyle, and park riding, and it features a classic cassette hub for direct power transfer. It also has a classic fast-stopping 990 U-Brake—not that Joker would ever use it. **$619**

AirMach Mini Inflator Pump
When the Joker isn't filling balloons with Smylex, he should use this palm-size, battery-powered pump that can bring any inflatable up to 100 psi in seconds. **$99**

Sharkbanz 2
If the Joker wants to enter another surfing contest, he should wear Sharkbanz. The battery-free wearable uses magnets to confuse a shark's sensitivity to electric fields, making them swim away. **$138**



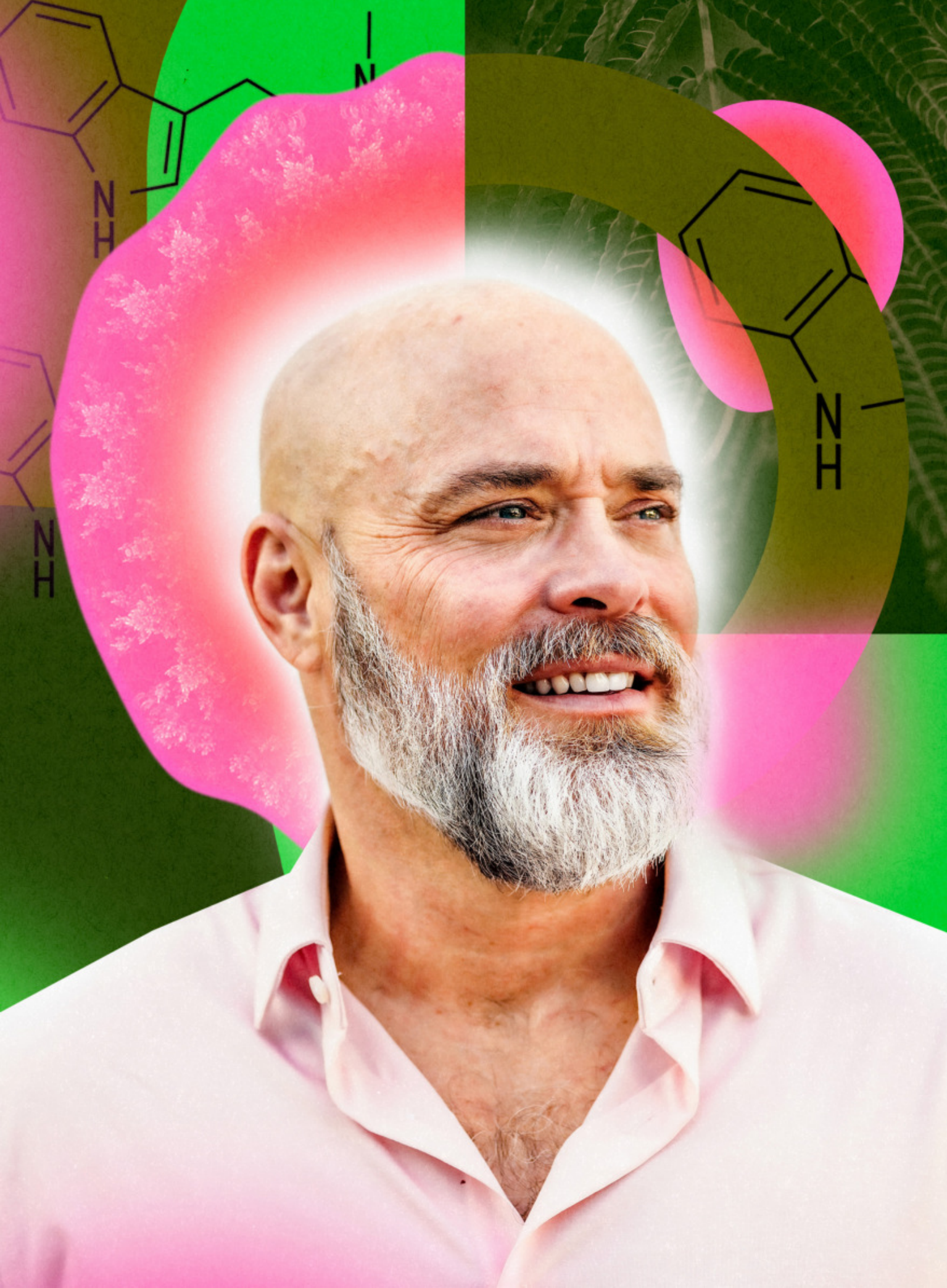
Rolls-Royce Black Badge Spectre
Let's just call this "Vapour Violet" beauty what it is: the Jokermobile. Rolls-Royce raided its toy box for this highly exclusive version of its Spectre EV, adding light-up grilles and number plates, a dark-finish interior, and—Joker's favorite—a boost button on the steering wheel. **$ Price on Request**

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALPACKA RAFT, REBS, CULT, ROLLS ROYCE, ISTYLES, AIRMACH, SHARKBANZ, GETTY IMAGES

GQSPORTS
THE REAL ACTION IS OFF THE FIELD
FOLLOW ALONG @GQSPORTS

ART BY TINA TONA

GETTY IMAGES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BY **ANDY GREENBERG**

THE GOD OF DMT

With just a sprinkle of the drug, anything can happen: trips to other dimensions, sex with aliens, communion with your creator. Akasha Song made it by the kilo in secret labs, sold it for millions on the dark web, and—for a while—lived a literal dream.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **SCOTT MCINTYRE**

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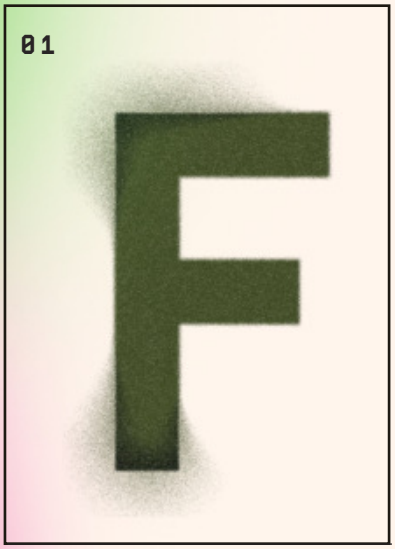


FOR TWO DAYS, AKASHA SONG had been riding in the passenger seat of a dusty Fiat truck through the desert-like shrublands of northeastern Brazil. The region, known as the caatinga, gets so hot and dry during much of the year that Brazilians sometimes call it the *portaria do inferno*, or "gatehouse of hell." At the wheel was a man Akasha had met just the previous morning who spoke almost no English.

Akasha, a well-built 43-year-old American dressed in Lululemon athletic wear with a shaved head, a wild Rick Rubin–white beard, and big blue eyes, was delighted by all of it. He'd spent most of the drive listening to Phil Collins, the Brazilian singer Zeca Baleiro, or whatever else the driver—let's call him José, though that's not his real name—put on the truck's sound system. Akasha loved watching the sandy hills and towns roll by and stopping to eat at roadside restaurants. He approached all travel with a kind of childlike glee, but this trip in April of 2021 had a special purpose: Akasha believed José was taking him to a farm where he grew a tree called jurema preta, whose inner root bark is known for its high concentrations of N,N-Dimethyltryptamine, or DMT.

DMT is a powerful psychedelic compound, capable of inducing brief, mind-blowing trips to otherwise inaccessible states of consciousness, or even, some of its users believe, other planes of reality. For Akasha, the substance was both his holy sacrament and his flagship product. He had spent half a decade setting up secret labs across the western US to turn imported jurema tree bark (which is legal) into DMT (which is not). Under his secret online handle, Shimshai, he'd sold tens of millions of doses to customers on the dark web in packaging emblazoned with his logo: a human with their eyes closed in bliss and a swirl of rainbow colors flowing out of their open cranium. Now Akasha had come to Brazil to find this mind-opening drug's ultimate source.

As the two men drove on, the landscape slowly changed from desert to subtropical forest. Late in the afternoon, José finally pulled over. He announced that they had arrived. The two men got out of the truck, and Akasha followed José off the road, over a wire fence, and into the woods. José stopped and gestured. "Jurema," he said.

Akasha, confused, asked José which tree he meant. Where was the farm they had driven 14 hours to reach?

"All of it," José responded.

Only then did Akasha realize: Every single one of the trees that filled the endless wild forest around him—with their short, gnarled trunks and fernlike leaves—held his key ingredient. From every pound of bark, his labs could produce hundreds of doses of DMT.

In that moment, Akasha says, he felt like he had just become the Pablo Escobar of psychedelics. "Holy shit," he thought. "That is a *lot* of DMT."

Today, thinking back to that turning point in his rise and fall as a hallucinogens kingpin, Akasha wishes he could say that he saw in that Brazilian forest the potential to heal the trauma of entire human populations or build a network of psychic touchpoints with other dimensions.

"But I didn't," Akasha says. "I saw billions of dollars."

THE FIRST TIME YOU SMOKE, vape, or intravenously inject a few dozen milligrams of DMT—sometimes called "dreams," "deems," or "spice" (yes, that's a *Dune* reference)—you can expect the next few minutes of your life to be unlike any you have experienced. In his book *The Spirit Molecule*, about the first modern study that administered DMT to humans, the psychiatrist Rick Strassman uses a TV metaphor to distinguish the drug's effects from those of other psychoactive substances. "Rather than merely adjusting the brightness, contrast, and color of the previous program," he writes, "we have changed the channel."

In online forum dispatches and descriptions to medical researchers, DMT users describe three fundamental levels of trip, depending on the size of your dose and how completely your mind is prepared to embrace its effects. First comes what some DMT adherents call the "waiting room": A wall of interlacing fractal images fills your vision, even when you close your eyes. You may hear things that aren't there or be filled with inexplicable euphoria or fear.

At the next level, this geometry folds out into three-dimensional space, and you might find yourself transported to the moon, a castle, a beach, inside a pyramid, or into a pulsating Russian bathhouse roughly the size of a womb, to name a few examples. You may "be" in this place and in your physical location at the same time, or inhabit this new destination so fully that you leave your body behind altogether.

In this other place—which many DMT users describe as another dimension—you're likely to encounter "entities." Elves, insectoids, reptilians, aliens, gods, and clowns are all common. One DMT test subject reported being attended to by a hyperintelligent 3-foot-tall Gumby. These beings may shun you, communicate with you, eviscerate and eat you, perform live surgical experiments on you, envelop you in love and sexual pleasure, or any combination of the above.

At the third, rarer level of trip, DMT psychonauts describe transcendent conditions like oneness with the universe, becoming God, embracing death, or an infinite void. In some cases, people report passing entire lifetimes in these other realms or states of being.

Back here on Earth, though, it's all over in less than 20 minutes. Some DMT fans call it "the businessman's trip," because the drug's most dramatic psychedelic effects fit easily within a lunch break. DMT is in fact the active ingredient in ayahuasca, the better-known psychoactive brew used in South American spiritual ceremonies, whose effects last as long as eight hours. Without the compounds in ayahuasca that slow the breakdown of DMT in your body—or the ones that notoriously make ayahuasca drinkers vomit—the substance flashes through the brain at turbo speed.

In spite of that brevity, some preliminary research suggests DMT can have long-lasting psychological and even therapeutic effects. While some medical experts warn that DMT can exacerbate certain mental health conditions, one 25-person drug company study from 2022 showed that 40 percent of clinically depressed test subjects given DMT were fully in remission six months after one or two doses. And though some users report terrifying, even traumatizing experiences, others say their quick, ultra-intense trips help them reconsider emotional problems, work through past trauma, or experience glimpses of the divine or moments of self-annihilation that reduce their fear of death.

For all those otherworldly effects, finding DMT in the everyday world is surprisingly easy. It exists in small quantities in every human nervous system, where its purpose isn't fully understood. (Some studies suggest it may play a role in dreaming.) It grows naturally not just in jurema preta, the organism from which it's most easily extracted, but also in plenty of other species, from the leaves of citrus plants to the internal organs of rabbits.

One of the most psychoactive substances humans have ever ingested, in other words, is already everywhere around and inside us. All it takes to unlock DMT's full, transcendental potential is someone willing to carry out a simple chemical extraction—and violate Title 21, section 841 of the US legal code.

For about seven years, for a very large number of Americans, that someone was Shimshai. To his friends, he was Akasha Song. To the federal agents hunting him, he was ultimately better known by his legal name, Joseph Clements.

GETTY IMAGES

BEFORE AKASHA SONG DISCOVERED DMT, Joseph Clements discovered LSD. In 1992, when he was 14, a friend gave him a tab of acid at their high school near Houston, Texas. He took it, went home, and had the most profound conversation of his life to that point with his father, who he says somehow didn't detect that his teenage son was on drugs.

"Who am I? Why am I here?" he remembers asking his dad and himself. "It was the first time these fundamental questions had ever hit me."

For much of the rest of his teens, Clements would drop acid about once a month. He'd go out with his friends, talk, listen to music, and watch them get drunk. Often he was the only one tripping. He loved the depth—the sense of telepathy, even—that LSD brought to his otherwise mundane teen social life. "All that square, normal stuff, I would do that on acid," he says. "And I did that just my whole damn childhood."

Around 10th grade, Clements stopped caring about school. He was also diagnosed with ADHD before anyone else he knew. When he got in trouble for disrupting class or ignoring his homework assignments, his father—who he was named after—would unfailingly defend him, often blaming his disorder. Eventually, Clements remembers, the school's teachers and administrators were so scared of his father's interventions that he felt almost immune from consequences—a sense of invincibility that would stay with him, to some degree, for the rest of his life.

Indeed, it stuck with Clements even as the years that followed became far more difficult. In his late teens, he says, he began to realize that his father had sexually abused him when he was younger. The memories had always been there, he says, but he had never allowed himself to confront the resentment he felt. He broke ties with his dad, choosing to live with his mother instead, and didn't speak with his father again until the elder Joseph Clements was dying of liver failure decades later.

After high school, he found a job in a restaurant and got married to a woman working as a waitress there, and they had a son. Soon, he says, he discovered that his wife was addicted to opioids and was selling their belongings to pay for her habit. They split up.

> Seven humanoids made of light were gathered around him. He realized, as he looked up at them, that they were somehow everyone he had ever known.

A natural salesman with "the gift of gab," as his mother puts it, Clements found work selling vacuum cleaners door-to-door, building websites, and making deals for billboard advertising in malls. He was also charged with multiple incidents of marijuana possession and two DUIs, one of which happened while he was on probation, leading to a six-month sentence in prison.

While he was there, his estranged wife died of a drug overdose. Their son, 6 years old at the time, was the one who found her body.

Clements moved on and straightened out his life. His son, who had been living with relatives until he was out of prison, moved back in with him. He remarried, had a daughter, and built a successful career running marketing for multiple local businesses, or in some cases consulting for entrepreneurs. He settled into the mainstream Texas culture of,

Akasha Song with his pet lemur, Oliver. ↗

as he describes it, "drinking and getting fat and working and cussing."

Then on New Year's Eve of 2012, when he was 34, Clements went to a concert by the String Cheese Incident, and his life truly began.

THAT NIGHT, AT A PERFORMANCE by the jam band that one of his wife's friends had invited him to attend near Denver, Colorado, Clements dropped acid for the first time in well over a decade. He found himself in a crowd of thousands of like-minded people of all ages, dancing, wearing strange clothes, looking beautiful, singing, several of them twirling balls of fire, many also clearly tripping. He immediately felt that these were "my people"—that he had found the community he had been seeking since his first hit of LSD 20 years earlier. His life back in Texas seemed tragically empty by comparison.

When he got home to Houston, he told his wife he wanted to quit his job, sell everything they owned, and move to Colorado. She responded to this apparent midlife crisis by leaving him and taking their daughter. He would fight for custody, unsuccessfully, for years to come.

Clements grieved the breakdown of his family. But his String Cheese Incident rebirth was not a passing whim. He began to prepare to move to Colorado with his son and to seek out a similar community—hippies, for lack of a better term—in Houston. He walked away from his career and began traveling nonstop to music festivals from Michigan to Costa Rica, occasionally with his son in tow, taking LSD, mushrooms, and any other psychedelic on offer.

As Clements reinvented himself, he says he could no longer stand to share his father's name. So he picked a new one, inspired by the Akashic records, a supposed ethereal compendium of all life experiences, past and present, that clairvoyants in 19th-century Europe said they could tap into.

It was also around this time that Akasha Song discovered DMT. A friend from the festival scene gave him a small capsule of what he called "dreams." Sitting on the floor of his home in Houston one evening, Akasha placed a pinch of the pale yellow crystals, which gave off a kind of perfumed new-shoe smell, onto the ash left behind in his weed pipe. He lit it and took his first hit. Akasha's vision dissolved into "platonic shapes," as he puts it, the geometric waiting room that initially beckons to DMT users. That was the extent of his first trip. As alien as DMT's effects were, he says he felt like he was entering a comfortable, natural mental state, exactly where he was supposed to be. "I just remember falling in love immediately," he says.

Over the next months, Akasha smoked DMT dozens of times. Describing the exact details of those escalating trips, for Akasha, is as difficult as for any dream. But he retains a strong memory of one DMT journey in particular, the one he considers the pinnacle of all his psychedelic travels.

That one climactic trip, Akasha says, began with a feeling that he had fallen and hit his head. When he came to, he was lying on his back in an endless void and seven humanoids made of light were gathered around him. He realized, as he looked up at them, that they were somehow everyone he had ever known.

One of them lifted him into a sitting position and gestured out at the void, which Akasha now saw was filled with infinite other groups of light-entities encircling infinite other people, each of them either waking or falling asleep. The differences in their states of awareness created a sine wave that Akasha could feel stretching out trillions of miles. The exclamations of those waking up combined into a resonant "music of epiphany," as Akasha heard it.

At that point, Akasha says, he began to understand that his physical life on Earth was a dream and that it was fading. He felt a pang of sadness that he would soon forget his mother, his children, and everyone he had ever loved. The entities seemed to sense his wish to keep dreaming. They laid him back down and, as the trip subsided, he returned to his body.

For days afterward, Akasha was reluctant to speak to anyone, still convinced that the people around him were characters being performed by the entities he had met—that he'd seen the reality underlying human experience and his entire waking life was a dream. On some level, he says, he has never stopped believing it.

AKASHA HAD HEARD THAT IT WAS possible—relatively easy, even—to make DMT, a notion that struck him as almost miraculous. A friend told him that a woman they knew who sold tie-dyed T-shirts at music festivals was familiar with the process. When Akasha asked her, she invited him to her house on the outskirts of Houston the next day. The moment he arrived, she sat him down on her living-room couch, handed him a pipe, and told him to smoke a dose—

AKASHA SONG

perhaps to make sure he wasn't a cop. As he returned to reality, he saw that she had already set out the precursor ingredients of DMT in front of him: lye, the solvent naphtha, and powdered jurema bark.

She walked Akasha through the process of DMT extraction, which he carefully wrote down in his journal: Mix lye with hot water in a mason jar. Add the bark powder, which turns into DMT-laden sludge. Pour in the naphtha and stir. When a yellow-tinged solution separates from the jurema sludge below, draw it off with a turkey baster, squirt it into a baking pan, then put it in the freezer. The crystals that form at the bottom, ready to smoke as soon as the last solvent evaporates, will be DMT.

Akasha's tutor gifted him a kilo of bark to get him started. He and a friend immediately drove to Ace Hardware, bought naphtha and lye, and followed the process Akasha had just been taught. They smoked the results the next day, reveling in the magic of DIY psychedelic alchemy. Then they drove around town, selling their DMT to friends, instantly making back the money they'd spent at the hardware store as well as a small profit. "It was the most amazing thing," says Akasha. "I had figured out how to make my most valued possession in the world."

By December of 2013, Akasha had followed through on his plan to sell everything he owned and move to Colorado. He couch surfed for a while, briefly joined a cult on a ranch, then moved in with a group that lived in a geodesic dome in the mountains. His son was with him at times or else lived with Akasha's mother. Throughout, Akasha made DMT in mason jars and sold it to meditation circles and at music festivals, using whatever freezer was at hand to crystallize his solutions and sourcing bark from a website in the Netherlands that his DMT tutor had told him about. (The bark itself wasn't illegal to buy or ship, he learned, because it can be used in non-psychedelic products like cosmetics.) No one in Akasha's circles ever referred to DMT as a "drug." It was "medicine"—and he was the medicine man. At times, Akasha's new vocation could also make him tens of thousands of dollars in a week.

In 2015, Akasha moved in with a group of friends in a house beside a reservoir in Nederland, a small town half an hour's drive from Boulder through a winding mountain pass. He acquired a ring-tailed lemur as a "service animal." The little black and white primate, whom Akasha named Oliver, would swing through the rafters of the house, play with Akasha and his friends in the snow-covered aspen trees in their front yard, or sit on his shoulder when he went into town or to parties in Boulder, boosting Akasha's local celebrity.

"He was this big, shiny person with a lot of energy," says one friend who asked me to call him Coinflip, because he'd decided based on a coin flip to partner with Akasha and sell DMT at music festivals. "He was just very inspired, with his big-ass eyes wide open."

Akasha, like his customers, strongly believed in the mind-opening value of DMT. He also understood on some level that he was a drug dealer and that continuing this new career entailed serious legal risk. A conviction for DMT possession or sale in the US carries years in prison for the amounts he was extracting, as much as decades for higher weights. But within Akasha's community, there was a mantra that he heard again and again: "The medicine is protecting you." Higher powers, he came to feel, would safeguard him in his spiritual mission. That same sense of invincibility he'd felt since childhood, despite all evidence to the contrary, now echoed in his mind—and pushed him to scale his ambitions ever larger.

SELLING DMT AT MUSIC FESTIVALS provided a decent living, but it was kind of a drag. Most people still didn't know what this three-letter substance was, so Akasha would often have to enter vacuum-cleaner salesman mode to make a deal: He'd offer a prospective customer a sample, they'd smoke it in front of him, and he'd wait 15 or 20 minutes for them to return from their trip and become conscious enough to actually buy a gram for $100.

By 2015, Akasha had heard about a better venue for drug sales: the dark web. He checked out a site called AlphaBay, which had become one of the top markets, and found that there didn't seem to be much competition to sell DMT. With very little thought, he opened a vendor account for himself with the handle "Shimshai," the name of an ayahuascarian he'd met in Costa Rica. He initially listed a few different quantities for sale on the market, just to see if anyone would bite. The next day, he was surprised to see he had made three sales, despite having no reviews or reputation of any kind as an online vendor. He scrambled to find mylar bags, bubble wrap, envelopes, and postage, then shipped off his product using a fake return address. The next day he had six orders. The day after that, 10, then 15. "And it just kept growing," Akasha says.

Within three weeks, to Akasha's amazement, Shimshai was up to 40 orders a day. Though most were for a single gram of DMT priced at $70 in crypto, the sales added up to thousands of dollars in daily revenue, nearly equaling what he had made selling in person.

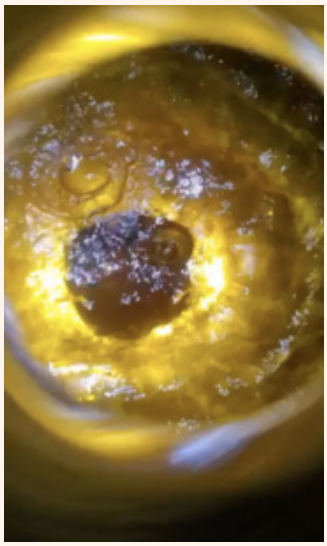
"This is a lot of money, and this is *easy*," Akasha thought. "So let's do it proper."

He was done with mason jars. Akasha bought four 35-gallon plastic barrels and put them in the garage of the shared house in Nederland. Around each one, he affixed an electric drum heater—a device that fits around a barrel like a corset. To mix his ingredients, he used an electric drill with a paint stirrer attachment. He'd pour the yellowish top solution into 5-gallon buckets and put them in a freezer he'd bought at Walmart. In about 10 days, he could produce more than a kilogram of DMT—tens of thousands of doses—which he stored in a Tupperware container.

Producing DMT as a cottage industry had its complications. Akasha's process produced gallons of waste—used solvent and highly alkaline, lye-infused bark sludge. At times he'd return the naphtha to the paint shop or hardware store where he'd bought it, but other times he'd dispose of it at a sewage plant. The sludge he'd dump in the woods, trying not to think about it too much. "Like a vegan who does cocaine," Akasha says, "I just didn't check in with myself about it."

By this time, Akasha had found a Mexico-based contact willing to sell him jurema bark in bulk. Soon Akasha was having the shipments sent to friends under fake names.

As online orders climbed toward 100 a day, Akasha turned a guest bedroom of his house into a shipping-and-receiving hub and started hiring a rotating crew of his housemates to do the endless work



At one of Akasha Song's former labs, DMT solution swirls inside a distiller and pallets of bagged jurema bark await processing.→

of preparing packages, measuring out DMT, sealing it, bagging it, and putting it in the mail. Positive reviews flowed in, bolstering Shimshai's reputation. "Out of the park," one customer would later write. "Always the best, don't look elsewhere, A++ in every category !" "Perfect transaction, thanks Shimshai!" "Literally sent by the gods."

By now Akasha had recruited his entire household to keep up with the grind. But ultimately he would trust only one associate to share in managing the online Shimshai persona: his old DMT-selling festival partner Coinflip. As the business boomed, Akasha and Coinflip would eventually do the daily work together of copying sales from the dark web into spreadsheets, responding to customers' questions, and resolving their complaints—though it was still always Akasha who controlled the keys to the bitcoin funds flowing into the Shimshai wallet and paid everyone else, including Coinflip.

As the months went by and Shimshai's profile grew on the dark web, so too did the secrecy of that name in Akasha's everyday life. "Even my closest friends didn't know it," Akasha says. Only Coinflip did. Soon, the two men came to see the pseudonym as almost taboo. They stopped saying it out loud, even to one another, even when they were alone.

IN EARLY 2017, AKASHA WAS WAITING in line at a music venue in Boulder when the doorman struck up a conversation with him. He told Akasha he'd have let him in for free—that what Akasha was doing "up in the mountains" was "changing the world for the better." Akasha immediately left the venue, went home, and started making plans to leave Colorado. This was not the aura of local celebrity he was looking for.

Over the next few days, he told his housemates they were done. He packed his DMT-making equipment into a trailer, hitched it to his Land Rover, and drove to Austin. His son, now a young teenager, came with him. (His lemur, Oliver, did not: As Akasha tells it, a small child had approached the prosimian in a parking lot and got a paw to the face. The local news reported it instead as a bite. Oliver was taken by the local police and ended up at a refuge in Florida.)

From Craigslist, Akasha rented a huge, three-story house on South Austin's Convict Hill with giant oak trees in the back yard, a view of the city from his bedroom's balcony, the sun streaming into its windows from three directions, and gallery lighting for his growing art collection. Akasha Song, once a homeless hippie, had come up in the world. Or as he puts it, "I went bougie as hell."

The Austin house had a two-car garage with plenty of space for Akasha's DMT setup. Shimshai was now receiving as many as 200 orders a day, often adding up to $15,000 in daily sales. Akasha began hiring friends from the local music scene to take on the work. As soon as anyone heard what he did, he says, they wanted in.

Then, in early July of 2017, Akasha found that AlphaBay was mysteriously offline for more than a week. The Wall Street Journal soon broke the news that the site had been taken down by an international law enforcement operation. Akasha saw his business evaporate before his eyes—including $32,000 he had stored in his AlphaBay account—just as he was growing accustomed to the wealth it was creating. "I'm not a hippie anymore," he thought. "I'm used to this lifestyle. I need money."

For a moment, he panicked. Then his fear subsided, and he got to work launching Shimshai accounts on all of the remaining dark-web markets, sites with names like Hansa, Wall Street Market, and Dream Market. AlphaBay's refugee customers, too, began to flow to these new drug-buying havens, and Akasha found that his orders crept up again in the days that followed.

By the middle of July, Hansa too was down: It had been the target of an operation by Dutch law enforcement. But through all that dark-web tumult, demand for DMT never waned. Within a few weeks, Shimshai's orders had returned to near their previous record. And Akasha was already thinking about how to level up again.

AFTER THE STRING OF MARKET busts, Akasha was restless and paranoid about keeping his DMT production in one place for too long. So he and his son began scrolling around Google Earth for a new home, and settled on Lake Tahoe.

They rented a house on the north shore of the lake with a backyard patio

surrounded by redwood trees stretching into Tahoe National Forest. The landlord let Akasha pay the rent in bitcoin. This time he brought Coinflip and another friend with him to live and work in the house from the start. They set up DMT production in the garage at more than twice the scale of the lab in Colorado, ultimately expanding to 10 of the same 35-gallon barrels. Two competent lieutenants were now taking much of the work off Akasha's hands, and he could settle into a lifestyle befitting the crypto millions rolling in.

Akasha and his son spent their days hiking, rock climbing, slacklining, and water-skiing in the ultra-clear lake, riding his new $150,000 G-Wagon to any of three ski resorts within a 20-minute drive, or partying with the locals—who all seemed to be rich, retired, and not very interested in how anyone had made their money. When someone did ask, Akasha would simply answer "bitcoin," which was enough to end the conversation (and which, he points out, was technically true).

Akasha spent his millions as fast as they arrived. He flew to Vietnam and Thailand, where he ran through Shimshai's orders on his laptop while getting a massage in the Phi Phi Islands. He took his son snowboarding in Switzerland and scuba diving in Maui.

On another trip to the Hawaiian Islands, Akasha was showering in a waterfall, exhausted after hiking a 13-mile trail through a jungle valley on Kauai, when a young, naked woman with brown hair and dark green eyes emerged from the trees and handed him a tamarind. The woman was named Joules—"like the energy unit"—and she invited Akasha to a communal dinner she was serving on the beach. He learned that she lived with a group of hippies in the woods, grew her own food, hunted and killed wild pigs and goats with snare traps and rocks, and mostly hadn't worn clothes for the last year. From then on, Akasha's new long-term goal was to move to Hawaii.

AKASHA SONG

A chunk of refined DMT crystal roughly equivalent to a thousand doses. ↗

Akasha now began to imagine a future in which he could remove himself entirely from the production and sale of DMT and run his operation from afar like a true kingpin. So he started periodically returning to Colorado to build the perfect DMT lab that would allow him to enact his exit strategy and realize his new dream of living in Hawaii.

He started renting a house in Jamestown, just northwest of Boulder, with an enormous garage fitted with more electric power, water, and drainage than he'd ever found before—he assumed it was from a previous cannabis-growing operation. At a festival in Idaho a few years earlier, Akasha had met a chemist who recrystallized minerals and made Eastern medicine tinctures in his own lab. Now Akasha paid him a five-figure fee for advice on his DMT operation.

Why, the chemist immediately asked, was Akasha siphoning off solvent and throwing it away when he could simply use a distiller to vaporize the naphtha and recondense it in another vat, ready to use again? Akasha's days of hunting for hundreds of gallons of solvent and then searching again for places to dump it were over. He bought an industrial-grade distiller with a glass window on the condenser and delighted in watching the clean naphtha rain down inside it, ready to use again.

That distillation process would leave behind a cake of DMT at the bottom of the distiller with only a small residue of solvent. The chemist introduced Akasha to a method for shortcutting hours of further drying with a piece of lab equipment called a Büchner funnel—a kind of tapered cup with a micron filter at the bottom over a glass flask. With some suction applied to a side hole in the flask, Akasha could pull most of the remaining solvent out through the filter, leaving the crystals behind. Akasha eventually spent around $150,000 implementing the chemist's recommendations and also upgrading his lab with his own innovations, like an automated stirring system that switched on electric drills to stir all the mixing tanks simultaneously.

When the chemist visited, he would give Akasha detailed specifications

about pressure and temperature settings and suggest Akasha write them down. "Grab a notebook," he'd tell Akasha. "I'm not going to answer your questions on the phone later."

But Akasha somehow remembered it all, he says. "No one ever does that," the chemist, who asked not to be identified, remembers thinking, impressed by Akasha's rare combination of an engineer's intelligence and a drug dealer's appetite for risk. "He's really smart, and he has the balls to do this shit. This dude is something else."

AT ITS PEAK, AKASHA'S NEW AND improved lab would produce a 5-kilo glass carboy of DMT every three days—as much as a million doses a month.

By 2018, too, he had found a source for jurema bark who would deliver thousands of pounds of it to him in person—Akasha never figured out who he got it from—avoiding the risk of having it shipped through the mail. Around the same time, a friend of Akasha's with a marijuana growing business asked if he could buy in to the DMT operation. Akasha worked out a deal in which this new partner would fully take over production and sales, and they would move the entire lab into a barn the partner owned on a 40-acre ranch in Evergreen, Colorado. Akasha believed he could now fully extract himself from the daily grind of his own businesses while still pulling in profits. It was time to move to Hawaii.

Akasha and Coinflip rented a house on a bluff in Maui, three doors down from the home of the actor Owen Wilson. Akasha and his son would swim with dolphins and sea turtles and catch lobster in the warm water just beyond their front yard. While Coinflip handled the Shimshai account, Akasha did little other than collect bitcoin and pay everyone their share. For once, there was no DMT production at this new house, so Akasha felt free for the first time to host massive parties, inviting the entire neighborhood over for taco Tuesdays and spending tens of thousands of dollars on sound systems and DJ equipment. He felt he had finally obtained the life he wanted: the money and the total freedom of a hands-off psychedelics kingpin in paradise.

Then one afternoon Akasha saw that his phone had six missed calls from his partner back in Colorado, the one now running his DMT production. Annoyed at the interruption, he didn't call back. Then came a text message with a link to what appeared to be a local news story.

Akasha tapped the link and found a live video of a huge barn fire in Evergreen. Shot from a circling helicopter, the videostream showed 25 firefighters working to extinguish flames rising into the sky from the burning building, surrounded by pines and snow.

"Oh fuck," Akasha said slowly to himself. His lab had just exploded.

NAPHTHA FUMES ARE FLAMMABLE. When Akasha was running his own lab, he'd cover his mixing barrels with lids that had a hole in the center, just big enough to accommodate the stirring end of a drill, but not the drill itself. In their postmortem of the catastrophe, Akasha and Coinflip determined that their partner in Evergreen had instead created a new setup with plastic tarps cinched down over the mixing vats—and the automated stirring drills inside. When those drills had activated on the day of the blast, one of their motors had created a spark.

The lab tech running production at the time had been just a few feet away from the vat that ignited. He saw a 14-foot-tall pillar of flame shoot up, slamming the tarp into the ceiling with a *crack*. As he looked for a fire extinguisher, the wood rafters of the barn were already alight. He realized the blaze was out of control, scrambled to pull propane tanks out of the barn that he feared would explode and kill firefighters, then fled.

The ensuing inferno was hot enough that any evidence of the lab's purpose seemed to have burned away. Police searched the house on the same property the next day, but the lab tech had managed to move their stockpile of jurema bark. No one was immediately charged. For months to come, Akasha and Coinflip came to believe that perhaps the cops had hit a dead end. Akasha gave his Evergreen partner $10,000 to get a lawyer, then cut ties with him. He made plans with Coinflip to rebuild Shimshai's DMT production pipeline from a new lab near Portland, across the Washington border, an area far from Evergreen where they had friends.

For the next months, Coinflip ran the new Washington lab while Akasha continued his dream life on Maui. At one party there, he ran into Joules, the woman he'd met under a waterfall in Kauai a couple of years earlier. She had left behind her hippie community in the jungle—and was now wearing clothes. He invited her to his house the next day and later took her for a ride on his motorcycle, a gleaming white Harley-Davidson Road King.

"That was the moment I fell in love with him," she says. "Just holding on to him, riding through the most beautiful landscape in our country, and him just tilting his head and talking to me over his shoulder and telling me all about his life." But not his life as Shimshai.

Joules never went home. She was fascinated by Akasha's preternatural confidence, his wealth, and his wide-eyed appetite for adventure. "He lives in a way I had never experienced with anyone else," she says. "He just wanted everything, now. The biggest, the best, the wildest, the craziest."

Around the same time, an old contact had reached out to ask Akasha if he

"He was just living this untouchable lifestyle. To be fair, he is one of the luckiest people I've ever met. But luck runs out."

SCOTT MCKINTYRE

could buy DMT from him wholesale. To Akasha's amazement, this buyer wanted entire kilograms of DMT at a time. To help Coinflip manage that level of production, he'd need to fly back to Portland.

It had only been days since he and Joules reconnected. They weren't yet officially a couple and had yet to kiss or even hold hands. But he decided to invite her to come along. Sitting in his Maui house, he turned to her and asked, "Do you know what I do for a living?"

JOULES JOINED AKASHA ON THE mainland, unconcerned about—or even intrigued by—what she was learning of his dark-web business. "The way that he said it so confidently, as if he had nothing to fear, was kind of calming," she remembers. "He has a very playful way of talking about serious things that's very disarming."

In reality, Akasha's business was barreling into another crisis. Not long after the wholesale DMT operation got started, law enforcement seized a 3-kilo shipment in the mail. Akasha and Coinflip now not only owed their wholesale customer close to $60,000 but had to reckon with the possibility that the feds could tie them to a shipment of serious weight.

Of his first time smoking DMT, Akasha Song says, "I can just remember falling in love immediately."↗

For Akasha, it was time for a strategic pause. For Coinflip, it was time to get out. In fact, since the lab explosion, he'd become spooked enough by Akasha's taste for risk that he decided to walk away entirely. "It was really great, and then it was really not OK anymore," Coinflip says. "Bad things started happening, the greed took over, and I had to cut him off."

Joules helped Akasha pack up his Washington lab equipment and put it into storage, then move out of his Maui house. He temporarily shut down his Shimshai accounts. For the months to come, Akasha told Joules, they'd voyage across Europe in what he described to her as a grand tour. In fact, he was trying to disappear. They flew to Istanbul, then traveled to Vienna, then Barcelona, crossing borders by land whenever possible to lessen their paper trail. Along the way, they stayed in five-star hotels and ate in Michelin-starred restaurants.

After nearly two months, though, Akasha had gotten no hint that international law enforcement was tracking him. So he decided to get back to work. He and Joules flew to the US, took his lab equipment out of storage, and drove with it in a trailer to Colorado. He reopened his Shimshai accounts, then reconnected with his wholesale customer, apologized for ghosting him, and rebuilt his lab in the basement of a house in the town of Morrison. With the help of old friends, he spent the next months making enough DMT to cover the kilos lost in the seizure.

Akasha was surprised, not long after, to get an invitation to meet contacts of his wholesale buyer in person. He declined to describe the details of that meeting or who exactly was there. But he came to believe that the actual customers of the DMT he'd been producing wholesale had been a group he calls "the Family," an LSD cartel whose history stretches back to the original experiments with acid that first introduced psychedelics to America in the 1950s.

Akasha says that in his meeting with these mysterious new associates, they

offered to buy as much DMT as he could produce for the foreseeable future at a rate of $20,000 a kilo.

"Any amount? Fuck," he says he responded. "I can make a lot."

SOON AKASHA WAS SELLING 10 KILOS a month to his wholesale buyer in addition to all his dark-web sales—far more total DMT than he ever put into the world before. He and Joules moved to a house on a 26-acre ranch back in Evergreen, with a creek flowing through it, elk and bears that would wander across the property, and a cavernous garage where he could set up a new lab. In 2019, Dream Market shut down and German police seized the servers of Wall Street Market. Now Akasha no longer panicked about market takedowns. Instead, he set up Shimshai accounts on more than a dozen smaller markets across the dark web, a collection of sites that together produced as many sales as ever but were far harder for law enforcement to track.

In early 2020, Akasha heard through friends about more troubling news: His partner with the burned-down barn had been criminally charged. The rumor, at least, was that police had learned Akasha's name, too—whether from clues at the crime scene or from his partner. Coinflip reached out to Akasha, to whom he had otherwise stopped speaking, and they met at a restaurant. Coinflip warned Akasha to "just stop, bro"—to give up his DMT operation and go legit before the feds caught up with him. But nothing Akasha's old friend said could persuade Akasha to relinquish his empire. "I was drunk on money," he says.

When Covid lockdowns hit, Akasha's wholesale arrangement abruptly ended. Whatever venues the people he called the Family had used to move his DMT had been shut down, they told him. Their sales had dried up. Akasha lost a major source of revenue, but he preferred the dark web's far higher margins anyway. By this time, DMT powder and DMT vape pens were still Shimshai's biggest products, but he also sold changa—herbs laced with DMT—LSD, MDMA, and mushrooms.

Then in 2021 came another problem, one that threatened Shimshai's operation at a more fundamental level: His bark source texted Akasha without explanation to say he was out of the business. Then he disappeared.

Without this key ingredient, Shimshai's production was paralyzed. Akasha began frantically searching for a new source. At one point, he simply googled "jurema." The results showed a town in the northeast of Brazil with that very name. A bit more reading confirmed his guess: This was indeed a place where DMT literally grew on trees. He knew no one in Brazil and spoke no Portuguese. On a wild impulse, he bought a plane ticket to Rio De Janeiro.

When he arrived in Brazil, he struck up a conversation with the Russian owner of the hostel he was staying at, asking him who might sell jurema preta. The hostel owner showed him an app called Mercado Libre, a kind of Brazilian eBay, where vendors were offering the bark to domestic customers. Akasha asked him to put in an order on one of those vendor pages, then used his account to message the seller and ask to meet. A few days later, he and a new associate, José, stepped out of a Fiat truck and into a forest of gnarled jurema.

Akasha and José negotiated a price of $26 per kilo, including shipping, compared to the $100 per kilo Akasha had been paying his source in Colorado. Then he shocked José by ordering a thousand kilos on the spot.

Before his flight home, he saw the full haul, ready to be shipped: 40 boxes of powdered bark, weighing more than a ton in total. He had only been in Brazil for 10 days, and he now had a direct connection to all the DMT-producing plant life he could ever need.

FOR THE NEXT YEAR, AS SHIMSHAI sold DMT at a new, fatter profit margin, Akasha and Joules lived larger than ever. They moved again and again, always to bigger, nicer houses, eventually ending up in a multimillion-dollar home near the main street of Boulder, right at the foothills of the Flatiron mountains. Joules got used to demanding granite countertops and walk-in closets. "I went through a crazy metamorphosis," she says, "from dirty hippie to well-kept queen."

Akasha picked out dresses for Joules and Louis Vuitton jackets for himself. They traveled almost nonstop. At one point she told him she had never eaten actual Mexican tacos, and he booked them next-day flights to Puerto Vallarta so she could try the tacos al pastor at his favorite taco stand. They paid bands to play at their home and threw enormous parties, sometimes so out of control that they resorted to hiring security to man the door.

Just as Akasha was hitting the zenith of his DMT production and profits—he now had so much access to jurema bark that he even resold it online at a markup—he was also restlessly looking for his next hustle. He dreamed of moving production to Peru or Brazil, countries where jurema was ubiquitous and he could legally set up giant labs.

Yet he'd begun to fear, at the same time, that the dark web's days were numbered as a venue for drug sales. A collection of federal agents known as Joint Criminal Opioid and Darknet Enforcement, or JCODE, had announced sweeping arrests of dozens of dark-web vendors in 2019 and 2020 without ever spelling out how their targets were identified. Akasha didn't sell opioids. But he was haunted by a mental image of these agents in a room somewhere working feverishly to track down people like him.

Joules could sense that Akasha was feeling the risks of his profession more than ever: She says he sometimes seemed uncharacteristically anxious or slept badly, and they began to lose friends who could feel the danger Akasha was courting.

"I think everyone could see the roller coaster coming to an end," Joules says. "He was just living this untouchable lifestyle. To be fair, he is one of the luckiest people I've ever met. But luck runs out."

ONE DAY IN APRIL OF 2022, not long after Akasha and Joules had returned to Boulder from a trip to Europe, he got a text message from his cousin who lived just outside Houston. "Hey! FedEx just left a bunch of boxes outside," she wrote. "From Brazil."

The shipment contained nearly 200 kilos of jurema tree bark from José—nine heavy boxes sitting at his cousin's front door. She and Akasha had an arrangement: He paid her to serve as a shipping point for the bark, which would then be picked up by another person and

taken to a sprawling production lab in a garage across the city. But this particular shipment was unexpected. José had sent it as a freebie after Akasha complained about sloppy packaging on previous bark orders and threatened to switch to a new source in Peru. Usually he had José ship to a fake name. But this unsolicited package was addressed to "Akasha, Raw Brazil Cosmetics."

"Wow," Akasha texted back. "What a freaking surprise."

He called his "cook" in Houston, a man who goes by the name Blake Puzzles—the same friend who had first taken him to the String Cheese Incident concert near Denver that had changed the course of his life a decade earlier, now a member of the Shimshai operation. Puzzles got in his van, a Japanese-import Nissan Homy, drove over to the cousin's house, packed the boxes into his van, and drove off, heading for the lab. A few minutes later, Puzzles noticed not one but two Chevy Tahoes in the rearview mirror. They seemed to be following him. Spooked, he pulled into the parking lot of a grocery store. His van was immediately surrounded by at least a dozen vehicles, out of which emerged local police and an even more alarming badge: Department of Homeland Security. They cuffed Puzzles, took his phone, drove him to an unmarked building, and left him in a cinder-block room with a two-way mirror.

The entire delivery and pickup, Puzzles and Akasha would later learn, had been a sting. Federal investigators had intercepted the jurema bark boxes on their way from Brazil, delivered them to Akasha's cousin, and then paid her a visit in which they strongly suggested she cooperate with them to avoid prosecution. All but one of the boxes Puzzles had picked up were in fact full of sand they'd swapped out for the bark. He'd been watched since he left his home.

In that cinder-block room, Puzzles was questioned by a Homeland Security agent. When the agent asked Puzzles if he knew who "Akasha" was, he answered that Akasha was a blonde girl who'd flashed him after a show he played with his band at a music venue a few days prior. As Puzzles told it, Akasha had then texted him to ask that he pick up some boxes for her. He'd agreed, naturally, in the hopes of getting laid.

Left: One of Akasha Song's branded DMT envelopes in an evidence photo. Right: A suitcase full of orders ready to ship. →

The agent suggested to him that this story was, in fact, bullshit. He offered Puzzles a chance to cooperate. Puzzles responded that he didn't know what the agent was talking about. After what felt like an hour, he was released. He ran several miles back to his van in the midst of a rainstorm and drove to a friend's house.

As Puzzles' arrest and interrogation unfolded, meanwhile, Akasha had gotten a phone call from his cousin. She asked him why cops had swarmed her home. Akasha, rattled, insisted that the bark he'd shipped to her was legal. It was just what he *did* with it that was illegal. "What the hell you think I've been doing for my whole life, the last, like, 10 years?" he told her on the phone. "You know what I do."

In fact, agents were still there, in his cousin's home, listening in on the call, which she had made at their instruction.

Akasha told his cousin not to talk to the cops—not knowing she already had—and promised to pay for her lawyer. He advised her to delete every communication they had ever had. Then he hurriedly put Shimshai into "vacation mode" across all the dark web markets. "We are closed," he later wrote on the profile pages. "Hurry and leave before the AI gets you."

Soon after, he got a call from Puzzles, who had ridden his bicycle to a Verizon store to get a new phone and to have the phone carrier remotely wipe the one seized by the feds. Both men were deeply anxious, in damage control mode. But it was just bark, after all, wasn't it? Not actual DMT. And maybe, they told each other, the agents had bought Puzzles' story.

THEY HAD NOT BOUGHT IT. IN REALITY, they had been closing in on Akasha for years.

Homeland Security, court documents would later show, had first learned the name Shimshai in a tip shared with the agency in 2017. The source, who has never been revealed, went as far as linking that secret handle to a PO Box in Nederland, Colorado, which was connected to the address where Akasha, his housemates, and Oliver the ring-tailed lemur had lived.

After that tip, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) created an alert for the name Akasha Song. Four years later, in the fall of 2021, when José mistakenly shipped a kilogram of bark from Brazil to a customer in Brooklyn with Akasha's phone number on it, the alert was triggered—just as it would be again six months later when José sent the shipment to Akasha's cousin.

Those alerts were enough to persuade Kevin Vassighi, an investigator who had joined HSI's Denver field office in 2020,

to check out Shimshai's accounts on the dark web. Vassighi, a central-casting federal agent with a square jaw, square shoulders, and a high-and-tight haircut, was surprised by the variety and scale of Shimshai's psychedelic sales. He noted that the dealer sometimes used the avatar of Rafiki, the monkey from *The Lion King*, and connected that image with local news articles about Akasha's lemur. Vassighi was particularly disturbed to see Shimshai offering DMT vape pens. Vapes, in Vassighi's mind, were for teenagers. "That indicated to me that he was selling to a more youthful audience," Vassighi says. "We're trying to protect kids."

By the spring of 2022, HSI was tracking the location of Akasha's phone, following him as he drove his new Tesla around Boulder, and watching his home from a camera on a nearby telephone pole. Agents had dug through Akasha's trash and found Shimshai's trademark DMT packaging, the logo of a head with a rainbow pouring out of it.

"He has a crunchy vibe. He has a lot of money. He doesn't seem to go to work," Vassighi recalls thinking. "A lot of stuff was pointing us in the direction of Joseph Clements"—enough that by June of that year they'd obtained a warrant to search his home.

WHEN AKASHA HEARD THE BANGING on the door, he was just sitting down in his bedroom to eat some pad thai and watch Netflix. He and Joules had been fighting, so she was decompressing alone upstairs. She ran down to the first floor to see who was making such a commotion.

By then, Akasha had a sense of exactly who had come knocking. He looked over to the couch and considered the two long, flat safes under it: One was full of money. The other was full of drugs. He grabbed the one full of drugs and quickly ran into the unfinished space over the garage. He hurriedly hid the safe under the insulation there. Inside was changa, DMT powder and vape pens, ketamine, LSD, MDMA, and mushrooms.

Then he went back to his bedroom, picked up his takeout container of pad thai, and began to slowly walk down the stairs, trying to affect the attitude of a fully unbothered, innocent person. On some level, he felt, his invincibility might still be intact. Maybe, even now, the medicine was protecting him.

Akasha Song and his then-girlfriend, Joules, in Kalalau Valley, Kauai.→

He came to the front door and found several rifles pointed at him by men in masks and camouflage. They cuffed him, dragged him outside, and put him in the grass. Joules and a housemate who sometimes worked in Akasha's DMT operation were already laid out on the other side of the yard. Akasha says he caught Joules' eyes from across the lawn, trying to silently signal to her with his expression not to talk to the agents.

The agents and police searched the house for hours. After scouring the home and seizing all of Akasha's electronic devices—somehow, amazingly, agents never found the stash of drugs Akasha had hidden—Vassighi took each member of the household into a bedroom for questioning, one by one. Joules refused to talk without a lawyer present and was released. Akasha's housemate, on the other hand, spent around 30 minutes in the room with the interrogators. Joules and Akasha would later learn he had told them virtually everything he knew.

Akasha, when it was his turn, also demanded a lawyer. So Vassighi and his fellow agents piled their suspect into an SUV, with Vassighi up front. Throughout, Akasha had maintained a serene calm and was now even ready to joke with his captors. "How about you guys let me out," he told Vassighi with his usual wide-eyed grin, "and you'll never hear from me again."

"You're not getting out of this car," Vassighi says he responded.

As they drove toward the jail, though, Vassighi says he felt he should keep Akasha talking. He knew he couldn't ask Akasha about anything illegal after he had invoked his Miranda rights. But he still tried to make conversation.

"Hey man," he asked, thinking of a genuine question that had been in his head since he first entered Akasha's house. "Where's the lemur?"

AKASHA WAS DENIED BAIL. Prosecutors pointed out that he'd traveled to 15 countries in just the last five years and was sure to flee the US if he wasn't held in custody. They were right. "If they had given me a bond," Akasha says, "I would have definitely left."

Akasha faced felony charges of conspiracy to possess, manufacture, and distribute an illegal drug—specifically about 300 kilos of a Schedule I controlled substance. That was the total weight of the two shipments of bark intercepted by authorities, which was described in the criminal complaint against Akasha as simply "unprocessed DMT." Akasha learned that, legal though jurema bark may be, this particular quantity of it had been made illegal by his intent to manufacture it into DMT. If convicted of all the charges, Akasha could spend as much as 40 years in prison.

On his attorney's advice, Akasha decided to accept a plea agreement. He says prosecutors floated the possibility of a shorter sentence in exchange for information on his customers, partners, suppliers, or staff, but he refused. Vassighi contends there was little the government didn't already know.

After Akasha had been in jail for six months, awaiting sentencing, his attorney made the argument that likely saved him from spending the rest of his life behind bars: Jurema bark might contain DMT, his lawyer told the court and prosecutors, but it was not itself DMT. The real weight of controlled substance in those 300 kilograms ought to be whatever small amount of actual N,N-Dimethyltryptamine Akasha planned to extract.

The Drug Enforcement Administration did its own test to determine what the actual percentage of DMT in Akasha's

AKASHA SONG

jurema bark had been. The answer: less than 1 percent. (Akasha privately scoffed that his labs could have gotten much more than that out of the bark, but he didn't argue.) Suddenly the weight of illegal drugs at the core of his indictment dropped from around 300 kilos to roughly 3.

Even after that stunning win, Akasha might still have faced decades in prison. But he'd had another incredible stroke of good fortune: The state of Colorado, where Akasha was being tried, had just voted to decriminalize a broad swath of psychedelics, including psilocybin, mescaline—and DMT. For so many years of his career as a drug dealer, he'd been told the medicine was protected by a higher power. Now, with a kind of uncanny timing, it actually was.

By the day of Akasha's sentencing in February of 2023, the substance he'd been convicted of manufacturing and selling was no longer a crime to use or own in his home state. Technically, that change didn't apply to selling and shouldn't have made any difference to Akasha's federal case. In reality, he says, it entirely changed the tone of both the prosecution and the judge in the hearing that determined his fate.

He was given 24 months, a third of which he'd already served. After another eight months, he was out on probation. Even Akasha himself couldn't believe his luck.

"I'm not going to die and go to hell or die and go to heaven. It's a play. It's just God having a good time being everything."

IN FEBRUARY OF THIS YEAR, ABOUT 18 months after his release from prison, I meet Akasha Song in a house just down the street from the one where he was arrested. All of the money from his time as a DMT kingpin was spent or seized, so Akasha has mostly been living with his mom in Texas or in an RV since he got out. But he has received permission from his probation officer to meet me here in Boulder, in his natural habitat, where he's staying with a wealthy friend and supporter—a fan of DMT with psychedelic paintings and 5-foot-tall crystals positioned throughout the house. It's just after 7 pm when we sit down together at the kitchen counter, and the sun has set behind the mountains.

We talk through his biography, including episodes I thought might be too sensitive to speak about on the phone, from his father's abuse, to his first wife's death, to his second wife leaving him with their daughter, to his time in prison. After five years together, he and Joules have broken up too. Joules told me that, after Akasha's arrest, she found out she was pregnant. Alone and terrified about the future, she had an abortion that he didn't learn about until later. He has yet to forgive her.

He shares each of these chapters in his life story with the same open, cheerful equanimity. I point out that it all seems to contradict his notion of himself as invincible, the sense of spiritual protection he has maintained in his role as medicine man. In reality, he's had a pretty rough life.

He disagrees. "Every time I go to the grocery store, the front parking spot's empty," Akasha says, grinning. "And that happens to me in every situation. Right before I get sentenced, they change the law. What the fuck?" If he could go back in time and do it all again, he says, he would.

I ask him where he thinks that inhumanly optimistic outlook comes from, and he answers that it was part of the lesson of his psychedelic experiences—particularly the breakthrough DMT trip in which the light-based entities invited him to wake up from the dream of his life. That helped embolden him to take ever-greater risks, he says. "I'm not going to die and go to hell or die and go to heaven," he says. "It's a play. It's just God having a good time being everything."

As Akasha explains this to me, I nod along despite having very little idea what he's talking about. But he later sends me a YouTube link to an excerpt of a 1969 lecture by Alan Watts, the British writer focused on Eastern philosophy, mysticism, and psychedelics. In the clip, Watts poses a thought experiment: Imagine that you are God and can experience whatever you'd like. After several lifetimes of pure pleasure and wish fulfillment, maybe you would choose to have more adventurous dreams, less and less in your own control, an infinite number of times.

"Finally you would dream where you are now," Watts says. "You would dream the dream of living the life you are actually living today. That would be within the infinite multiplicity of choices you would have. Of playing that you weren't God."

This is, in fact, what Akasha means by the name he chose for himself, he tells me in his friend's kitchen: the notion that he and his many DMT customers and his abusive father and Homeland Security Investigations agent Kevin Vassighi and you and I are all facets of God, pretending we are not. That idea, revealed to him by his own homemade N,N,dimethyltryptamine coursing through his brain, changed everything for him. "It helped me just *play*," he says. "And that made life so much richer."

"Even before I had the money, even if I never had the money," Akasha tells me, smiling, staring at me with the wide, blue eyes of a true believer, "I was free." W

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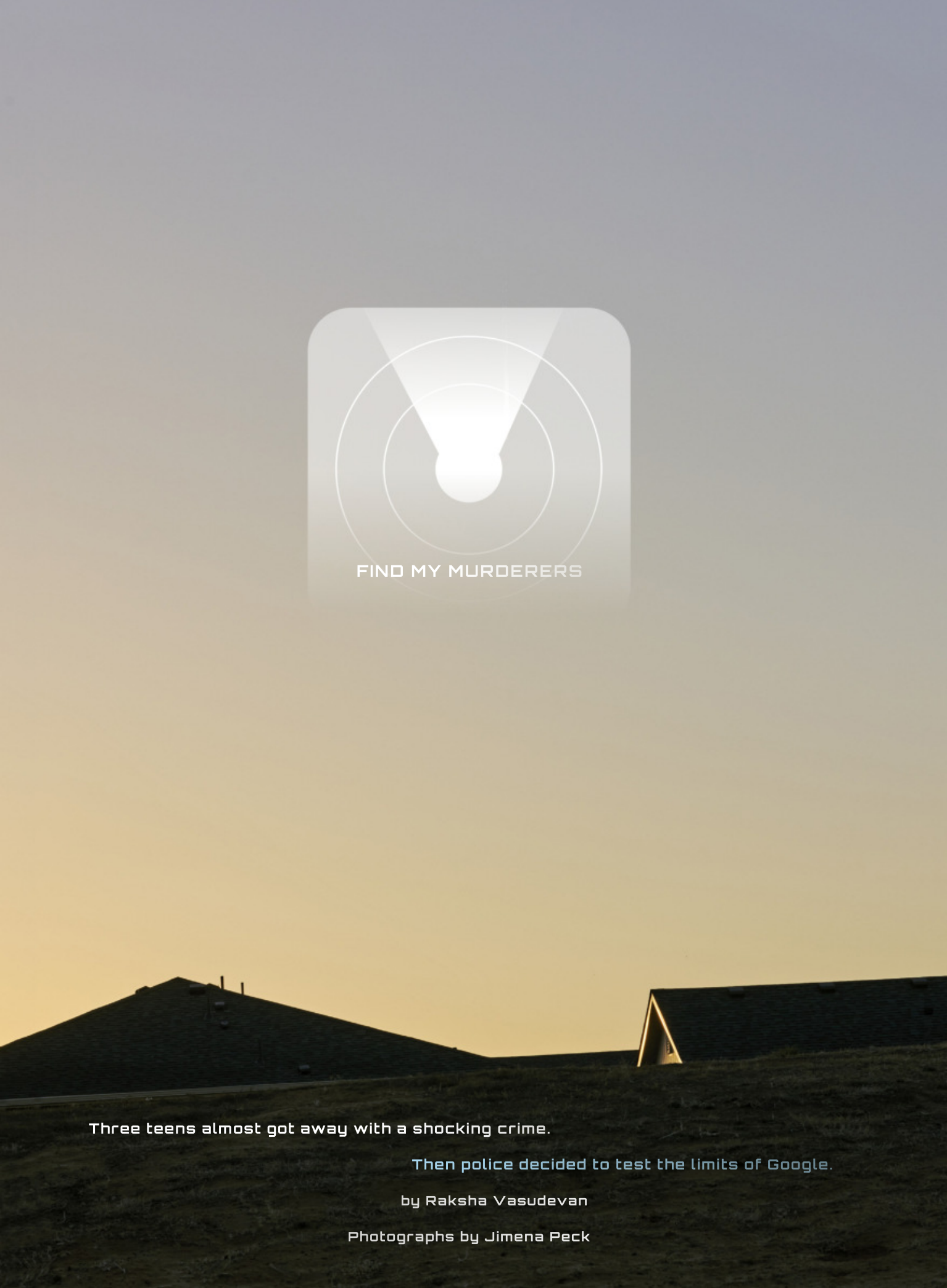


Three teens almost got away with a shocking crime.

Then police decided to test the limits of Google.

by Raksha Vasudevan

Photographs by Jimena Peck

DENVER POLICE
DETECTIVE
06-154

Amadou Sow woke to the shrieking of smoke detectors. It was a little after 2:30 am on August 5, 2020, and his house in the suburbs of Denver, Colorado, was ablaze. The 46-year-old rushed to his bedroom door, but a column of smoke and heat forced him back. Panicked, Sow ran to the rear window, broke the screen with his hand, and jumped. The two-story drop fractured his left foot.

Sow's wife Hawa Ka woke their daughter Adama, who shared their room. She dragged the terrified 10-year-old to the window and pushed her out. Sow tried to catch her but missed. Miraculously, the girl landed on her hands and feet, uninjured. Then it was Ka's turn. When she leaped, she fell on her back, shattering her spine in two places. Sow barely heard her howls of pain. He was thinking about their 22-year-old son, Oumar.

He couldn't see any movement inside Oumar's room. He hurled a rock at the window, but the glass held steady. Despair filled him. Then he noticed Oumar's car wasn't in the driveway. He must be working his night shift at 7-Eleven. Thank God! Sow's family was safe. But what about the others in the house? All told, nine people called 5312 Truckee Street home.

Sow had bought the four-bedroom property in the northeastern suburb of Green Valley Ranch in 2018. The neighborhood was newly built and sparsely populated, cut off from the bulk of the city by miles of prairie grass, giving it an isolated, ghost-town feel. But for Sow, a Senegalese immigrant who usually worked nights at Walmart, the home was a refuge. Not long after his family moved in, his old friend Djibril Diol's family joined them. Diol—Djiby to his friends—was 29 and a towering 6′ 8″, a civil engineer who hoped to one day take his skills back to Senegal.

The first fire truck arrived at 2:47 am. By then, the inferno had shattered the windows and plumed the air with smoke. The stench of burning wood filled the neighborhood. When firefighters subdued the blaze enough to get in the front door, they found the small body of a child. Djiby's daughter Khadija had been two months shy of her second birthday. Farther in sprawled Djiby himself and his 23-year-old wife, Adja.

Next to Adja lay Djiby's 25-year-old sister, Hassan. She'd only been living in the house for three months. Like Adja, she had dreamed of going back to school to study nursing. She died with her arms still wrapped around her 7-month-old daughter, Hawa Beye. Medical examiners would later conclude that all five died of smoke inhalation, airways coated in black soot, internal organs and muscles burnished "cherry-red" from the heat.

At the same time firefighters were entering the house on Truckee Street, Neil Baker, a homicide detective for the Denver Police Department (DPD), was awoken by a call from his sergeant. Baker—in his fifties with reading glasses, thinning hair, and a rosy complexion—threw on a suit, muttered a hurried goodbye to his wife, and jumped in his car.

After nearly 30 years as a Denver-area cop, Baker knew his way around town. He also knew that Green Valley Ranch was a confusing rabbit's warren of nearly identical roads. So before he set off, he did something innocuous, something anyone might have done: He Googled the address. And like anyone who Googles something, he was thinking about the search result he wanted—not the packets of data flitting between his device and Google's servers, not the automated logs of what he was searching for and where he was searching from. But this unseen infrastructure would be key to figuring out what happened at Truckee Street—and it may soon extend the reach of law enforcement into the private lives of millions.

Three weeks before the fire, 16-year-old Kevin Bui went into central Denver to buy a gun. Bui had led a charmed life. His family emigrated from Vietnam before he was born, and though they struggled financially at first—Bui describes his childhood homes as "the projects"—by the time he started high school, his dad's accounting business had taken off. The family moved to a palatial house in Lakewood, on Denver's western outskirts, complete with views of the mountains. Bui took to wearing Gucci belts and Air Jordans.

"I disliked school, but I was always really good at it," Bui tells me. He was athletic too—a swimmer, and an inside linebacker on his school football team, the Green Mountain Rams. He was close with his older sister, Tanya, despite their seven-year age difference. Tanya filled Kevin's girlfriend's lashes and bitched to him about her boyfriends. The siblings discussed adopting a dog together.

But there was a darker side to their life: Kevin and Tanya dealt fentanyl and marijuana, often finding customers on Snapchat. Kevin planned to start "carding," stealing people's credit card information on the dark web. And he took to amassing weapons.

The guys Bui had arranged to meet in central Denver on that day in July had promised to sell him a gun. Instead, they robbed him of his cash, iPhone, and shoes.

Afterward, Bui bubbled with humiliation. A few weeks earlier, football practice had shut down because of the pandemic. Classes had already been virtual for months. He felt he was "just doing bullshit": waking up, logging on to Zoom, and returning to bed. The robbery tipped him over the edge. That night, at home in Lakewood, Bui resolved to get even. He pulled up the Find My device feature on his iPad and watched as it pinged his phone. The map zoomed east, past downtown, finally halting at Green Valley Ranch. A pin dropped at 5312 Truckee Street.

The next afternoon, Bui sent a Snapchat message to his friend Gavin Seymour. "I deserved that shit cuz I knew it would happen and still went," he wrote, according to later court records. "They goin get theirs like I got mine."

Bui and Seymour ran track together and lived just a four-minute drive apart. But in many ways

PREVIOUS:
In 2020, an arson attack on a house in Denver killed five people.

RIGHT:
Neil Baker and his police colleagues used Google to help solve the case.

POLICE

they were opposites. Where Bui oozed confidence, Seymour was plagued by insecurity. Where Bui excelled academically, Seymour struggled with multiple learning disabilities. In contrast to Bui's apparently cookie-cutter-perfect family life, Seymour's parents split when he was young, and his father was largely absent.

In response to Bui's message, Seymour wrote: "idk why I would let you go alone I'm sorry for that."

Bui wrote back: "I cant even be mad cuz we used to do the same shit to random niggas."

But he *was* mad. More to the point, he was disgraced, his self-image—as a winner, a champ, top dog—shattered. A week later, Bui searched the Truckee Street address 13 times, including on sites like Zillow that detailed its interior layout. And he persuaded Seymour, who was just about to turn 16, and another friend, 14-year-old Dillon Siebert, to help him exact revenge. In late July, Seymour and Siebert also searched the address multiple times.

Bui would later insist they'd planned to simply vandalize the house: hurl rocks at the windows, maybe, or egg the exterior. But sometime in those last hot days of July, things took a darker turn. On August 1, Bui messaged Seymour: "#possiblyruinourfuturesandburnhishousedown."

Three evenings later, Siebert and Bui went to Party City to buy black theater masks, then grabbed dinner at Wendy's. They met up with Seymour, and at around 1 am on August 5 the three piled into Bui's Toyota Camry. They stopped at a gas station, where they filled a red fuel canister to the brim. Then they set off for Green Valley Ranch, cruising past downtown and the Broncos stadium and through an industrial area dotted with smokestacks and semitrailers. The drive took at least 30 minutes, long and boring enough for any one of the teens to express doubt, postpone, chicken out. But it seemed none of them did, not even when they got to 5312 Truckee and saw a minivan—a family vehicle—parked out front.

They found the house's back door unlocked. It's not clear who doused the gas on the living room walls and floors or who set the flame. When it caught, all three stumbled out to Bui's car and took off.

When Detective Baker arrived at 5312 Truckee Street two hours later, neighbors swarmed the street, their faces lit by the glow of the flames. The air tasted like ash. He spotted Ernest Sandoval, his partner on the case. Sandoval, nearly 15 years younger than Baker, had moved to homicide from the nonfatal shootings unit only a few weeks earlier.

The officers on the scene told the pair that there could be as many as five fatalities. They suspected faulty wiring had sparked the blaze. It was terrible, tragic—but at least homicide's job would be straightforward. "We'll have some reports to write," Baker remembers thinking. "We'll have to probably go to the autopsies." Then a man with melancholy eyes and a faint soul patch approached him. "I have something you should see," he said. Noe Reza Jr. lived next door. He took out his phone, which held footage from his security cameras.

The video clips started at 2:26 am. They showed three figures in hoodies and masks stealing through the side yard of 5312 Truckee. One points toward the rear of the house. Then they move out of the camera's sight. Twelve minutes later, the trio sprint back toward the street. At 2:40, flames erupt from the home's lower floor. Someone screams. The fire consumes the entire house within two minutes.

"Oh, are you kidding me," Baker thought. Five people had been murdered and their only lead was a few seconds of video that revealed nothing of the criminals' identity.

That morning, Kevin Bui slept in. Around 10 am, he searched online for news of the fire. There was an abundance. The tragedy had sparked headlines and Twitter threads across the world. The Council on American Islamic Relations issued a statement urging police to consider religious hate as a potential motive. Leaders of Colorado's African community expressed fear, wondering which of their members might be targeted next. Even Senegal's president tweeted he'd be watching the case closely.

That's when the truth began to dawn on Bui. Like many people, he had assumed that Apple's Find My device software offers exact location tracking. But such programs rely on an unreliable combination of signals from GPS satellites, cell towers, Wi-Fi networks, and other connected devices nearby, and their accuracy can vary from a few feet to hundreds of miles. In the past, this ambiguity has led to threats, holdups, and even SWAT raids at the wrong addresses. (Apple did not respond to a request for comment.)

As he read the news that morning, Bui realized that he had made a terrible mistake. These innocent faces didn't belong to the guys who had robbed him. He'd killed a family.

That August, Denver's usually crystalline skies were choked with wildfire smoke. Baker and Sandoval barely noticed. They spent their waking hours in DPD's 1970s-era HQ, with its

fluorescent lighting and gumball machines in the lobby.

The pair had begun their investigation with the usual stuff: interviewing the victims' friends and family, combing through text messages and financial records. The more they dug, the clearer it became that the families of 5312 Truckee lived quiet, pious lives: work, mosque, home.

The detectives returned to video footage. On clips pieced together from nearby Ring cameras, they saw the car the suspects were in taking a series of wrong turns as it entered the neighborhood, and wildly swerving and mounting curbs on the way out. But the videos weren't clear enough to identify the exact make or model of the dark four-door sedan. The detectives quickly obtained what are known as tower dump warrants, which required the major phone networks to provide the numbers of all cellular devices in the vicinity of 5312 Truckee during the arson. And they slung a series of so-called geofence warrants at Google, asking the company to identify all devices within a defined area just before the fire. (At the time, Google collected and retained location data if someone had an Android device or any Google applications on their cell phone.)

The warrants returned thousands of phone numbers, which the detectives dumped on Mark Sonnendecker, an agent at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) who specialized in digital forensics. Sonnendecker, slim and soft-spoken with a face resembling Bill Nye's, focused on T-Mobile subscribers. He had noticed that a "high percentage" of suspects in previous cases subscribed to the network.

There were 1,471 devices registered to T-Mobile within a mile of the house when it ignited. Using software that visualizes how long it takes a signal to bounce from a cell tower to a phone and back again, Sonnendecker narrowed the list down to the 100 devices nearest to the house. One evening toward the end of August, detectives roamed the area around 5312 Truckee with a cell-phone-tower simulator that captured the IDs of all devices within range. That night, there were 723. Sonnendecker cross-referenced these with the 100 from earlier, eliminating the 67 that showed up on both lists and likely belonged to neighborhood residents who could be ruled out. That left 33 T-Mobile subscribers whose presence in Green Valley Ranch in the early hours of August 5 couldn't easily be explained. Investigators considered bringing them in for questioning but decided against it; without any evidence to detain them, they feared spooking the arsonists into fleeing the country. Nothing pointed to any obvious suspects. Still, Sonnendecker remained confident that something would pop up to give police the breakthrough they needed.

But as summer turned to fall, progress on the case began to falter. Hundreds of Crime Stoppers tips were still pouring in, including some from psychics. Baker and Sandoval crisscrossed the state to interrogate a trio found with drugs, guns, and masks in Gypsum and to interview the Senegalese community in the mountain town of Silverthorne. (For decades, West Africans had found work in the ski hub's many resorts, hotels, and grocery stores.) They even chased a lead to Iowa. "We got pretty hopeful here and there, but it just kind of fizzled out," recalls Baker.

The detectives were feeling the pressure. In the wake of nationwide Black Lives Matter protests that summer, a petition demanding police stop "undervaluing the lives of BIPOC individuals" and prioritize the investigation into the deaths of the Diol family collected nearly 25,000 signatures. Baker and Sandoval were told not to take on any new cases so they could work this one full time.

At a department meeting in September, Baker and Sandoval pleaded with colleagues for ideas. Was there anything they hadn't tried—anything at all? That's when another detective wondered if the perpetrators had Googled the address before heading there. Perhaps Google had a record of that search?

It was like a door they'd never noticed suddenly flung open. They called Sonnendecker and the district attorney, Cathee Hansen. Neither had heard of Google turning over a list of people who had searched for a specific term. In fact, it had been done: in a 2017 fraud investigation in Minnesota, after a series of bombings in Austin in 2018, in a 2019 trafficking case in Wisconsin, and a theft case in North Carolina the following year. Federal investigators also used a reverse keyword search warrant to investigate an associate of R. Kelly who attempted to intimidate a witness in the musician's racketeering and sexual exploitation trial. But those records had largely been sealed. So, unaware of these precedents, Hansen and Sandoval drafted their warrant from scratch, requesting names, birth dates, and physical addresses for all users who'd searched variations of 5312 Truckee Street in the 15 days before the fire.

Google denied the request. According to court documents, the company uses a staged process when responding to reverse keyword warrants to protect user privacy: First, it provides an anonymized list of matching searches, and if law enforcement concludes that any of those results are relevant, Google will identify the users' IP addresses if prompted by the warrant to do so. DPD's warrant had gone too far in asking for protected user information right away, and it took another failed warrant 20 days later and two calls with Google's outside legal counsel before the detectives came up with language the search giant would accept.

Finally, the day before Thanksgiving 2020, Sonnendecker received a list of 61 devices and associated IP addresses that had searched for the house in the weeks before the fire. Five of those IP addresses were in Colorado, and three of them had searched for the Truckee Street house multiple times, including for details of its interior. "It was like the heavens opened up," says Baker.

In early December, DPD served another warrant to Google for those five users' subscriber information, including their names and email addresses. One turned out to be a relative of the Diols; another belonged to a delivery service. But there was one surname they recognized—a name that also appeared on the list of 33 T-Mobile subscribers

BELOW:
Baker with partner Ernest Sandoval, who was working his first homicide case at the DPD.

they'd identified earlier in the investigation as being in the vicinity of the fire. Bui.

The phone was registered to Kevin's sister Tanya—he may have borrowed it after his was stolen. But a quick scan of the social media accounts of the remaining subscribers on the list yielded three suspects: Kevin Bui, Gavin Seymour, and Dillon Siebert. They were teens, they were friends, and they didn't live anywhere near Green Valley Ranch. They lived in the Lakewood area, 20 miles away. There was no reason for them to be Googling a residential address so far across town.

"There was a lot of high-fiving," recalls Sandoval. But it was too soon to fully celebrate. They now had to build a case strong enough to prosecute minors in a high-profile homicide. "We knew this was going to be a big, big, big fight," Baker says.

On New Year's Day of 2021, Baker drove by the Bui family's home and snapped a photo of the 2019 Toyota Camry sitting in the driveway. Another warrant to Google yielded the three teens' search histories since early July. In the days before the fire, Siebert searched for retailer "Party City." On Party City's website, Baker spotted masks similar to those worn by the three perpetrators. The company confirmed that their Lakewood location had sold three such masks hours before the fire. Baker then contacted the shopping complex to get footage from the exterior security cameras that night. He saw that around 6 pm, a 2019 Toyota Camry pulled into the parking lot. "It just snowballed," says Baker, shaking his head in remembered wonder. "I cannot believe the amount of evidence that we were able to come up with."

From the teens' texts and social media, detectives were able to see that the morning after the arson, with the house on Truckee Street still smoldering, Bui and Seymour embarked on a camping trip. A week later, Bui went golfing. A few months after that, Seymour joined the Bui family on vacation in Cancun, where more smiling photos of the two emerged, this time on beaches and boats. The posts enraged the detectives. "Where's the remorse?" Baker said.

Shortly after 7 am on January 27, police arrested Bui, Seymour, and Siebert. Seymour and Siebert refused to talk, but Bui agreed to an interview and promptly confessed. "He'd had six months of just keeping this inside," said Baker. "He knew that his time had come."

For the next 18 months, the case dragged through the court system. It took a year for a judge to rule that Siebert, 14 at the time of the crime, would be charged as a juvenile, while 16-year-olds Bui and Seymour would be tried as adults. If convicted, they faced life in prison.

In June 2022, just when it seemed like the prosecution could finally proceed, Seymour's lawyers dropped a bombshell. They filed a motion to suppress all evidence arising from the reverse keyword search warrant that DPD had served to Google—the key piece of information that had led detectives to Bui and his friends.

Nearly two years had passed since the Diols were killed in their own home. Many of the victims' family and friends still moved through their days fearfully and lay awake nights, reliving the nightmare. Now, the detectives had to tell them that the case might be thrown out altogether, potentially allowing the three teens to walk free.

Seymour's defense argued that, in asking Google to comb through billions of users' private search history, investigators had cast an unconstitutional "digital dragnet." It was, they said, the equivalent of police ransacking every home in America. The Fourth Amendment required police to show probable cause for suspecting an individual *before* getting a warrant to search their information. In this case, police had no reason to suspect Seymour before seeing the warrant's results. But the judge sided with law enforcement. He likened the search to looking for a needle in a haystack: "The fact that the haystack may be big, the fact that the haystack may have a lot of misinformation in it doesn't mean that a targeted search in that haystack somehow implicates overbreadth," he said.

The teens' fate looked sealed. Then, in January 2023, Seymour's lawyers announced that the Colorado Supreme Court had agreed to hear their appeal. It would be the first state supreme court in America to address the constitutionality of a keyword warrant. Though the verdict would apply only in Colorado, it would influence law enforcement's behavior in other states, and potentially the US Department of Justice's stance on such warrants too.

Baker and Sandoval's investigation had now been dragged into a legal process that could reshape Americans' right to search and learn online without fear of retribution. "Even a single query can reveal deeply private facts about a person, things they might not share with friends, family, or clergy," wrote Seymour's legal team. "'Psychiatrists in Denver;' 'abortion providers near me;' 'is my husband gay;' 'does God exist;' 'bankruptcy;' 'herpes treatment' … Search history is a window into what people wonder about—and it is some of the most private data that exists."

The Colorado Supreme Court heard arguments for the case in May 2023. Seymour's attorney argued that reverse keyword searches were alarmingly similar to geofence warrants, which courts across the country had begun to question. (In August 2024, a federal circuit court of appeals—considered the most influential courts in the United States after the Supreme Court—ruled geofence warrants "unconstitutional under the Fourth Amendment" for never specifying a particular user.)

Denver's DA, Cathee Hansen—who'd helped detectives craft the warrant in question nearly three years earlier—compared it to querying a bank for suspicious transactions. "You don't go into each person's account and scroll through their transaction history to see if it applies to that account," she said. "You just tap into a database." Neither search violated any individual's privacy, she argued.

The judges pushed Hansen on the warrant's applicability to abortion, outlawed in a growing number of states. "I could see warrants coming in from one of those states to Colorado: Who searched for abortion clinics in Colorado?" said Justice Richard Gabriel. "Under your view, there'd be probable cause for that. That's a big concern."

After a five-month wait that Sandoval remembers as

LEFT:
Green Valley Ranch, in the eastern suburbs of Denver, was a new and sparsely populated neighborhood with a confusing road layout and rows of cookie-cutter family homes. Even longtime city residents found it confusing to navigate.

"gut-wrenching," the court finally ruled in October 2023. In a majority verdict, four judges decided the reverse keyword search warrant was legal—potentially opening the door to wider use in Colorado and beyond. The judges argued that the narrow search parameters and the performance of the search by a computer rather than a human minimized any invasion of privacy. But they also agreed the warrant lacked individualized probable cause—the police had no reason to suspect Seymour before they accessed his search history—rendering it "constitutionally defective."

Because of the ruling's ambiguity, some agencies remain leery. The ATF's Denver office says it would only consider using a keyword warrant again if the search terms could be sufficiently narrowed, like in this case: to an address that few would have reason to search and a highly delimited time period. The crime would also have to be serious enough to justify the level of scrutiny that would follow, the ATF says.

Not everyone is so cautious. Baker and Sandoval regularly field calls from police across the country asking for a copy of their warrant. Baker himself is considering using it in another case. And a cottage industry of consultants that, until recently, helped police craft tower-dump warrants now trains them to requisition Google. No systemic data is being collected on how often reverse keyword warrants are being used, but Andrew Crocker, surveillance litigation director of digital rights group the Electronic Frontier Foundation says it's possible that there have been hundreds of examples to date.

Meanwhile, another case—in which a keyword-search warrant was used to identify a serial rapist—is now before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. If the warrant is upheld, as it was in Colorado, their use could accelerate nationwide. "Keyword warrants are dangerous tools tailor-made for political repression," says Crocker. It's easy to envision Immigrations and Customs Enforcement requesting a list of everyone who searched "immigration lawyer" in a given area, for instance.

By the summer of 2024, all three teens had accepted plea deals: Siebert got 10 years in juvenile detention; Seymour got 40, and Kevin Bui 60, both in adult prison. Bui received the harshest sentence because he'd masterminded the arson. (He was also caught with 92 pills of fentanyl and a couple grams of methamphetamine in his sock while in detention.)

To the victims, none of it was enough. Amadou Beye, the husband of Hassan Diol and father of seven-month-old Hawa, addressed Bui directly at his sentencing. "I will never forget or forgive you for what you did to me," he said. "You took me away from my wife, the most beautiful thing I had. You took me away from my baby that I will never have a chance to see." A shudder ran through his tall body. Beye had been in Senegal awaiting a visa when his family was killed. His daughter was born in America, and he never got to meet her.

Bui remained expressionless throughout the victim impact testimonies, save for a furiously bobbing Adam's apple. Peach fuzz darkened his now 20-year-old jaw. He wore a green jumpsuit, clear-framed glasses, and white shoes. At the end, he read from a crumpled sheet of yellow ruled paper. "I was an ignorant knucklehead blinded by rage. I'm a failure who threw his life away," he said. "I have no excuses and nobody to blame but myself."

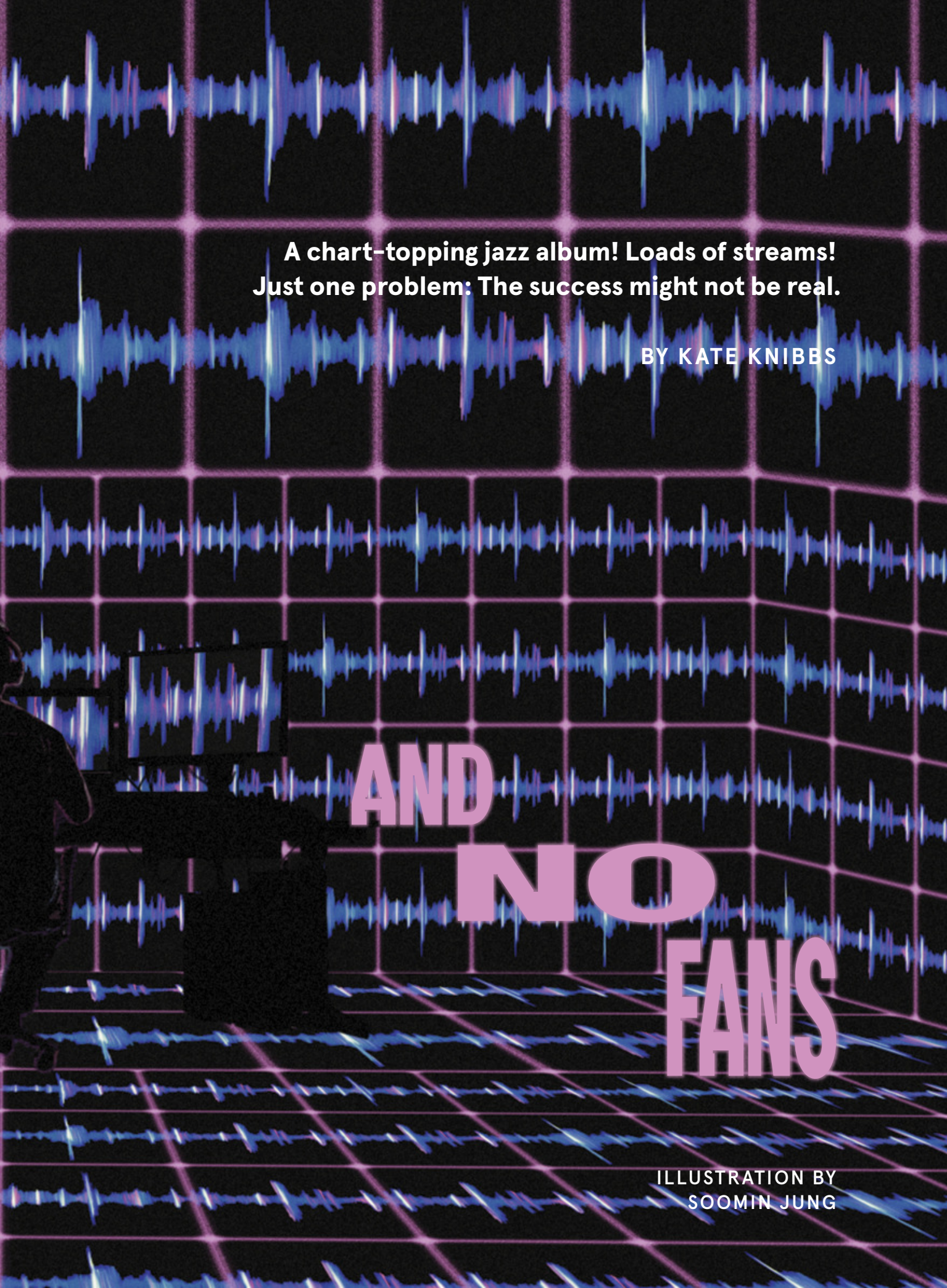
But when I talked to Bui three months later, he sounded upbeat. "When you go to prison there's a lifeline," he told me. Monday through Friday, he took classes on personal growth and emotional intelligence. Aside from that, "I just work out, I chill with some of the guys. We eat together, watch TV, watch sports," he said. He tried to catch every Denver Broncos and Baltimore Ravens game. Lately, he'd also gotten into *Sex and the City*.

Not once did Bui complain about the lack of privacy in prison or his exile from the outside world, both physical and digital. Prisoners had little internet access, which, for someone of his generation, who'd grown up online, must have been hard. Did he know who he was without his iPhone, his Snapchat and Instagram? Who were any of us really, without our online personas, our memes and TikToks and the access to the entirety of human knowledge afforded by our devices? As Seymour's lawyers had argued, didn't our deepest, truest selves reside online, in our searches and browsers?

All Bui would say was that he was in a good place now. Then he had to go: He was getting a haircut. Online or not, he still had an image to maintain.

RAKSHA VASUDEVAN *is a journalist and former aid worker. Her debut nonfiction book,* Empires Between Us, *is forthcoming.*

A
BILLION
STREAMS



A chart-topping jazz album! Loads of streams! Just one problem: The success might not be real.

BY KATE KNIBBS

AND NO FANS

ILLUSTRATION BY SOOMIN JUNG

ALMOST NO ONE HITS IT BIG

The odds are so bad it's criminal. But on a late spring evening in Louisville, Kentucky, Mike Smith and Jonathan Hay were having that rare golden moment when everything clicks. Smith was on guitar. Hay was fiddling with the drum machine and keyboard. Dudes were *grooving*. Holed up in Hay's living room, surrounded by chordophones and production gizmos, the two musicians were hoping that their first album as a jazz duo would finally win them the attention they'd been chasing for years. ¶ It was 2017. The men, then in their forties, were longtime collaborators and business partners—though they made an odd couple. Smith owned a string of medical clinics and wore tight shirts over his meticulously maintained muscles. He lived in a sprawling house in the suburbs of Charlotte, North Carolina, with his wife and six kids. He'd judged on a reality TV show and written a self-help book. Hay—larger, softer, comfy in sweatsuits and Crocs—lived in an apartment and was dating a stripper. He loved weed. He'd hustled as a music publicist for years; by reputation he was best known in the industry for promoting a nuclear rumor that Rihanna had hooked up with Jay-Z. He'd recently, on an impulse, had sleeves tattooed on his arms. To avoid annoying his health-nut friend, he'd sneak into his bedroom to vape.

IN MUSIC.

Smith and Hay finished their album and called it *Jazz*. That fall, they released it on all the usual places—Spotify, Apple Music, Tidal—and as a physical album. Alas, it failed to take off. Smith and Hay weren't total nobodies; a few songs they had coproduced for other artists years earlier had gotten some buzz. So the two men decided to retool *Jazz* and release an updated version, adding new songs.

Jazz (Deluxe) came out in January 2018. Right away, it shot up the Billboard chart and hit No. 1. Hay was elated. At last, real, measurable success had arrived.

Then, just as suddenly, the album disappeared from the ranking. "Nobody drops off the next week to zero," says Hay, remembering his confusion. He called other artists to ask if they'd ever seen this before. They hadn't. Questions piled up. If so many people had listened, why did they suddenly stop? He scanned the internet for chatter. Even a single freaking tweet would have been nice. Nada. Where were the *fans*? "No one's talking about the music," Hay realized.

Pulling up Spotify's dashboard for artists, Hay scrutinized the analytics for the pair's work. Listeners appeared concentrated in far-flung places like Vietnam. Things only got stranger from there. Here's how Hay remembers it: He started receiving notices from distributors, the companies that handle the licensing of indie artists' music. The distributors were flagging Smith and Hay's music, from *Jazz* and from other projects, for streaming fraud and pulling it down. Smith told Hay it was a mistake and that Hay had messed up securing the proper rights for samples. Hay frantically tried to correct the issue, but the flagging persisted.

Hay, panicking, badgered Smith to help him figure out what was happening. Finally, Hay says, Smith offered some answers: Smith had instructed his staff at the medical clinics to stream their songs. It didn't sound like the full story.

Then, last September, Smith turned up at the heart of another music streaming incident, this one rather epic. The FBI arrested him and charged him in the first AI streaming fraud case in the United States. The government claims that between 2017 and 2024, Smith made over $10 million in royalties by using bot armies to continuously play AI-generated tracks on streaming platforms. Smith pleaded not guilty to all charges. (Through his lawyer, Smith declined to be interviewed, so this is very much Hay's side of the story, corroborated by numerous interviews with people who worked with the two men.)

When Hay found out, he marveled at the idea of his former collaborator managing to get richer than nearly all working musicians without being a household name. "He had a billion streams," Hay claims, "and no fans."

WHEN HE FIRST met Smith in 2013, Hay was working as a publicist; to make extra cash, he sold online PR consulting to aspiring musicians at $250 a session. Smith came across those sessions and signed up. "He did something really grandiose," Hay says. "He booked like *20* hours." Ka-ching!

Smith flew in for his tutorial in person. Though Hay was the local, Smith picked the meeting spot, a sports bar in a strip mall. ("Control freak," Hay says now.) The way Hay understood it, Smith had amassed a fortune running medical clinics. As his next act, Hay says, Smith wanted to get famous, and he was willing to spend whatever it took. By the end of the first consultation, he says, they were simpatico: Smith yearned to be a star, Hay a starmaker.

The two men quickly settled on a strategy. Although Smith wanted to be an artist himself, they'd start a label called SMH Records and work their way through the industry as producers and behind-the-scenes movers—basically, paying their way in. "Spared no expenses on the budget," says B. Stille, one of the members of the southern rap group Nappy Roots, who worked with Smith and Hay a few times. One of the pair's first wins was coproducing a buzzy single for the group. Smith

also financed, and became a judge on, BET's *One Shot,* where he scouted for rap's next stars alongside DJ Khaled, Twista, and T.I., despite the fact that they were all big-name hip-hop stars and he was a relatively unknown record producer with a checkbook.

Around the time Smith started working on *One Shot*, Hay began to suspect that his buddy's finances were not all in order. He and another SMH employee dug around to see what they could uncover about their colleague. In February 2015, Hay sent their business associates a 111-page document accusing Smith of financial mismanagement. Hay thought it was his "*Jerry Maguire* moment." He was confident he'd convince at least one other person that something was deeply wrong.

But others saw their relationship with Smith differently. "Everybody stayed with Mike," he says. "It made me feel really stupid." People in their circle trusted Smith, it seemed. Kxng Crooked, a rapper who judged with Smith on *One Shot*, found him wholesome. "I flew out to his house and played with his kids," the rapper says. Goldy Locks, a musician on the SMH label, says she'd had "a completely positive experience" working with Smith. "Out of all the labels that I've ever been on, Mike's the only one that's ever taken care of us."

One Shot aired in 2016, lasting for a single season. It marked a high point in Smith's career—and a downturn for Hay. In 2017, two men broke into Hay's apartment and held him and his daughter at gunpoint. Smith came to check on him afterward. Hay appreciated the gesture, and his anger faded. That is, until their jazz album came out and Hay began to suspect Smith again.

In the late 2010s, Smith linked up with Alex Mitchell, the CEO of an AI song generator startup called Boomy. AI song generators, which allow people to "create" music by selecting or customizing prompts about what the tunes should sound like, now have millions of users but were then a niche product. Smith was, it must be said, ahead of the curve here—few people appreciated then how omnipresent AI would become in the music world. In the government's indictment, Mitchell fits the description of an unnamed, not-charged co-conspirator:

Starting around 2018, a "Chief Executive Officer of an AI music company" provided Smith with "thousands of songs each week."

"Keep in mind what we're doing musically here ...," the CEO wrote, per the indictment. "This is not 'music,' it's 'instant music' ;)." Smith allegedly assigned the AI songs to fake artists. The songs had otherworldly, dictionary-scraping names: "Zygophyceae," "Zygophyllaceae," "Zygopteraceae." The fake artists were equally odd, with names such as "Calm Force," "Calm Knuckles," "Calms Scorching," and "Calorie Event."

According to the indictment, Smith uploaded the music onto streaming platforms and, with the help of contractors, created thousands of accounts. Using "small pieces of computer code" that he'd

STREAMONOMICS:

1,040 BOT ACCOUNTS × **636** STREAMS PER DAY = **661,440** TOTAL STREAMS PER DAY × **0.5¢** PER STREAM

bought, Smith was able to "continuously" play the music on those accounts—essentially commanding a custom bot army to play his AI tracks nonstop. Those plays triggered royalty payments. In other words, Smith was—if the allegations are true—cementing his status as a master purveyor of AI slop. Indeed, the ranks of AI slopstars are filling up fast with the hustlers flooding Amazon with crappy robo-books and the schemers gobbling up websites and turning them into AI content mills. The internet has become a warehouse of algorithmically manufactured imitations of cultural products, all of it spewed into existence by people trying to game the faulty creator economy and get rich quick.

↑ Jonathan Hay, second from the left, and Michael Smith, fourth from the left, pose with their associates.

← Michael Smith and Jonathan Hay were longtime collaborators and something of an odd couple.

"Keep in mind what we're doing musically here … this is not 'music,' it's 'instant music' ;)."

HAY SAYS HE knew nothing about AI at the time. But he believed *something* was up with their streaming numbers. The pair's fighting intensified. "You steal from streaming platforms," he accused Smith via email in December 2019. "These are federal crimes, bro." Smith responded by resending the pair's legal agreement. Hay claims that Smith cut him out of deals and withheld income—and it made him snap. Hay dashed off another jeremiad to their associates. He wrote to Billboard employees and other people in their professional network outlining his suspicions. This time, Hay says, he was ready to cut ties. He says he went to the local police and even the FBI: "I blew the whistle as loud as I could."

But then—once again—nothing happened. A Billboard employee eventually texted Hay that the company had decided not to pursue an investigation. (Billboard declined to comment on this particular incident, though a spokesperson for Penske Media Corporation, which now owns and operates Billboard, noted that it will remove inaccurate records if it is made aware of the problem in a timely fashion. Billboard records from Smith and Hay still stand.) Embarrassed, Hay told the Billboard team that he had gone off his medication. He certainly felt crazy.

Smith, meanwhile, wasn't having a great time either. He was navigating a lawsuit from staffers at his medical offices, who claimed that

= **$3.3K** → **$99K** → **$1.2M**

DAILY ROYALTIES | MONTHLY ROYALTIES | ANNUAL ROYALTIES

JONATHAN HAY

↑ Above: Michael Smith (far right) poses with members of a failed pop group called Pink Grenade.

Below: Smith, in a wolf mask, shoots a music video with his wife, Erika Smith.

his clinics had engaged in Medicaid and Medicare fraud. The lawsuit alleges that Smith was moving money from the clinics into SMH Records, which was something Hay had suspected. Smith and his codefendants reached a settlement in 2020, requiring them to pay $900,000.

Nevertheless, by 2022 Smith seemed to be back on a roll. He produced a song featuring Snoop Dogg and Billy Ray Cyrus. He was also lining up a slate of ambitious projects—including a horror movie with RZA and an animated series in which a cartoon Smith would travel to the afterlife, set to music by Snoop Dogg and RZA. (Neither Snoop Dogg nor RZA responded to requests for comment.) But success turns on a dime in this business, and by the following year something appeared to have changed. Smith went silent on Instagram. The horror movie came out without much fanfare. According to a timeline included in the criminal indictment, Smith was spending at least some of that time trying to convince groups within the streaming industry that he was legitimate. Then, in spring 2023, he received a notice that dealt a major blow. The Mechanical Licensing Collective, a nonprofit entity that collects and dispenses royalties for streaming services, had confronted Smith about fraud and was now halting payments. A crucial money spigot had turned off.

On September 4, 2024, federal agents pulled up to Smith's sprawling Colonial Revival–style brick home. They handcuffed him and perp-walked him out to their navy sprinter van, past his three-car garage, as befuddled neighbors looked on.

For Hay, the arrest was a vindication. In the indictment, Hay—who fits the description of an unnamed "Co-Conspirator 2" and is not charged with a crime—comes across as something of a patsy, the person whose work Smith used to "fraudulently generate royalty payments" before pivoting to AI. Other people in Smith's orbit have expressed surprise. Music promoter Bram Bessoff, who is registered as a cowriter on hundreds of Smith's AI songs, expressed "total shock" to WIRED and says he's cooperating with authorities. (While Bessoff is neither named nor charged in the indictment, "Co-Conspirator 4" is described as a music promoter.) Meanwhile, Boomy CEO Alex Mitchell, who was also registered on hundreds of the songs along with Bessoff and Smith, declined to respond to questions. A spokesperson for Boomy, Phoebe Myers, told WIRED that neither Mitchell nor Boomy "had any knowledge or involvement in Smith's alleged criminal conduct," nor had they "engaged in bot streaming or knew of any bot streaming by Smith." Myers adds that Mitchell did not have any relationship with Smith's music publishing company.

Included in the government's indictment is an excerpt from a jubilant email Smith sent to his co-conspirators (the ones who sound an awful lot like Mitchell and Bessoff). In it, he wrote about how they'd be receiving 10 percent cuts on the royalties generated by the songs: "We are at 88 million TOTAL STREAMS so far!!!"

KATE KNIBBS, *a* WIRED *senior writer, promises not to use bots to juice this story's performance.*

SABRINA KELLY

TECHNICALLY, IT'S NOT illegal to make a bonkers amount of AI-generated music and put it on a streaming service. Tacky, yes. Disrespectful to the art form, probably. But not necessarily against the law. In fact, it's pretty common: Deezer, a French music streaming platform, estimates that 10 percent of the songs uploaded every day are AI-generated. If a company were to train its song generator on copyrighted music without permission, it could run into trouble if music labels alleged that use case was illegal, as happened to Suno and Udio, two companies that are now the subject of lawsuits. Boomy appears to be aboveboard on this count—it has been certified by Fairly Trained, a nonprofit that checks whether generative AI companies got consent to use their training materials. So the first part of Smith's (alleged) scheme might, at most, be violating laws of good taste.

Then there are the bots and fake accounts. Major streaming services often prohibit their use in their terms of service. Last year, a man in Denmark was found guilty of committing music streaming fraud by using bots to play his music on Spotify and Apple Music. Still, the vast majority of such behavior goes unpunished. Morgan Hayduk, the co-CEO of a streaming-fraud-detection startup called Beatdapp, has monitored whole networks of bad actors siphoning money from streamers. "Conservatively, it's a billion-dollar-a-year type of problem," Hayduk says. "The Michael Smith case is the tip of the iceberg."

A 2021 study by France's National Music Center found that around 1 to 3 percent of all streams were fraudulent; Beatdapp puts that number at around 10 percent. According to Hayduk, some of the startup's clients consistently flag 17 to 25 percent of streams as fraudulent, and occasionally as many as half. As he sees it, AI song generators are a "supercharger" for this behavior, and Smith's alleged scheme isn't especially cutting-edge. "If you're a sophisticated, organized criminal," Hayduk says, "you would do this from the comfort of a beach in a non-extradition country."

It remains unclear which streaming companies ended up paying Smith the most money, probably because nobody wants to admit their detection efforts flopped. Spotify, the industry's behemoth, claims that its fraud detection programs caught Smith's alleged chicanery. "It appears our preventative measures worked and limited the royalties Smith was able to generate from Spotify to approximately $60,000 of the $10 million," says Laura Batey, a company spokesperson. Apple, YouTube Music, and Tidal did not respond to questions; Amazon declined to answer questions about Smith. While distributors and streaming services are leaning on sophisticated fraud detection in an AI-versus-AI war, some industry experts argue that the real problem is the streaming companies' royalty payment structures and that only a total overhaul can curb the problem.

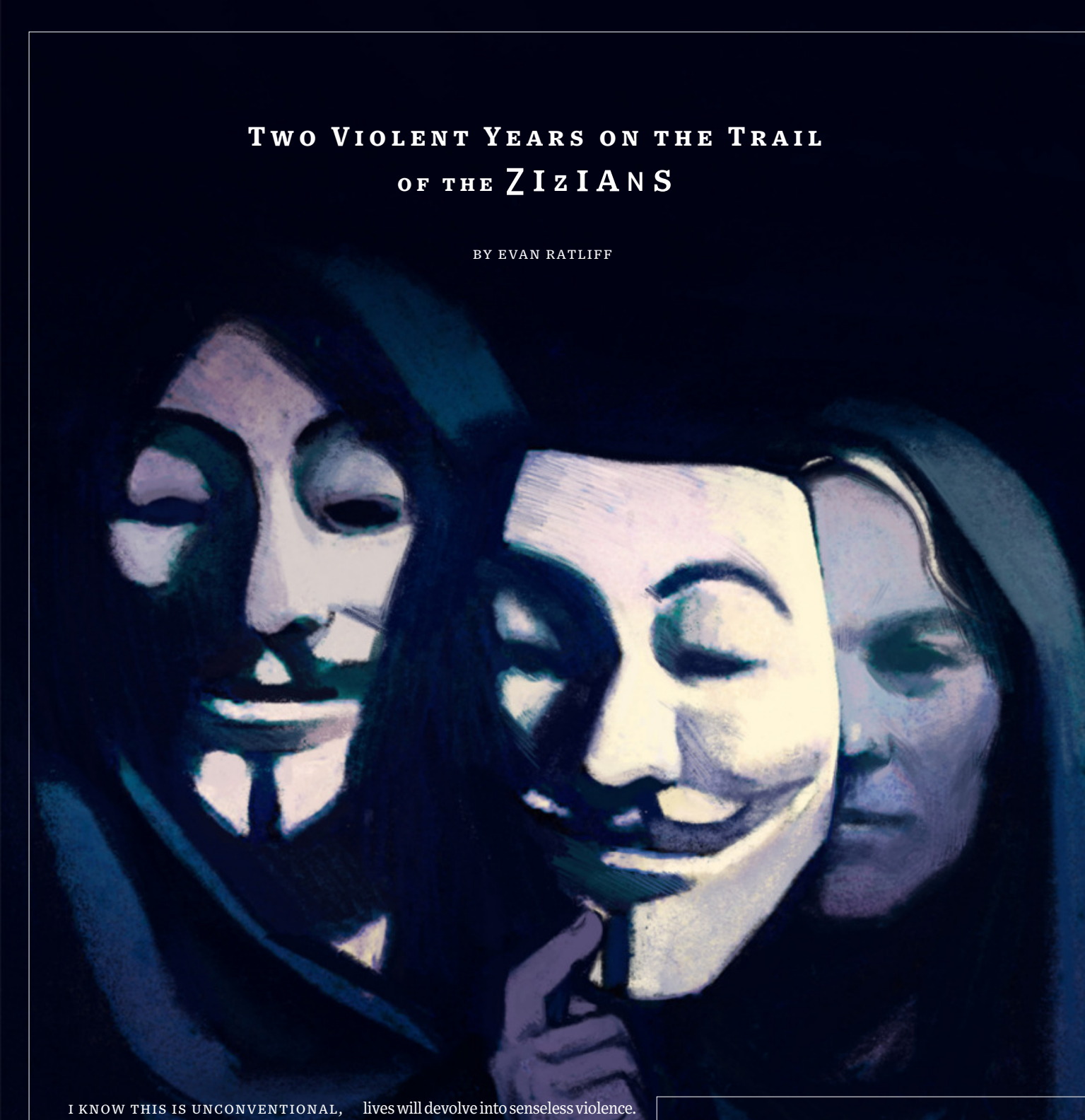
Most music streaming fraud goes unpunished. "Conservatively, it's a billion-dollar-a-year type of problem."

In some corners of the music world, Smith isn't seen as a villain. Musicians often accuse streaming platforms, and of course labels, of ripping off artists. Goldy Locks, Smith's former client, says some people view him as a modern-day Robin Hood. Others see him as a man who exploited an exploitative system, a creature native to a grift-addled environment. After all, radio invented payola, and Spotify inserts bulk-produced stock songs into popular playlists. The line between organic and paid audiences has always been blurry. Even in 19th-century France, "claqueurs" were paid to fill opera houses and clap.

Smith is now out on bail. His lawyer, Noell Tin, said in a statement that "Mike Smith is a successful songwriter, musical artist, devoted husband, and father to six children. He looks forward to responding to the charges against him in court." The case, brought in the US Southern District Court of New York, will be heard by Judge John Koeltl, who has a history with consequential tech lawsuits, including a ruling against the Internet Archive and an ongoing case against the crypto hub Binance. If found guilty, Smith faces up to 60 years in prison. Either way, Smith has earned a seat in the music business pantheon: The government has cast him as an avatar for the AI era's gifts to grifters. Anybody can click a few buttons and make a song now. But building a fortune off these audienceless ditties? From one angle, it might be a crime. From another, it's a new art.

Two Violent Years on the Trail of the Zizians

BY EVAN RATLIFF



I KNOW THIS IS UNCONVENTIONAL, but I'm going to start by telling you the ending. Or at least, the ending as it stands today. Most of the people involved in this story wind up either dead, maimed, spending months in a mental hospital, languishing in jail, or going underground. It's a tragedy from almost any angle, especially because, at the outset, most of these people were idealists committed to doing as much good as possible in a world they saw as beset by existential threats. In spite of those aims, or perhaps in pursuit of them, over the course of this story their lives will devolve into senseless violence. And by the time we reach the present, six people will be killed, two others presumed dead by suicide, and at least two in hiding. Countless friends and family members will find themselves bereft. I feel it's only fair to warn you that, in this story, justice and redemption have so far proven hard to come by.

How did so much go so wrong? When did it begin to fall apart? Trying to answer these questions—as I've done for the past two years—is not unlike querying a chatbot powered by a large language model.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED WHEN A GROUP OF TECHNICALLY GIFTED YOUNG PEOPLE SET OUT TO SAVE THE WORLD—AND THEN WENT WAY TOO FAR.

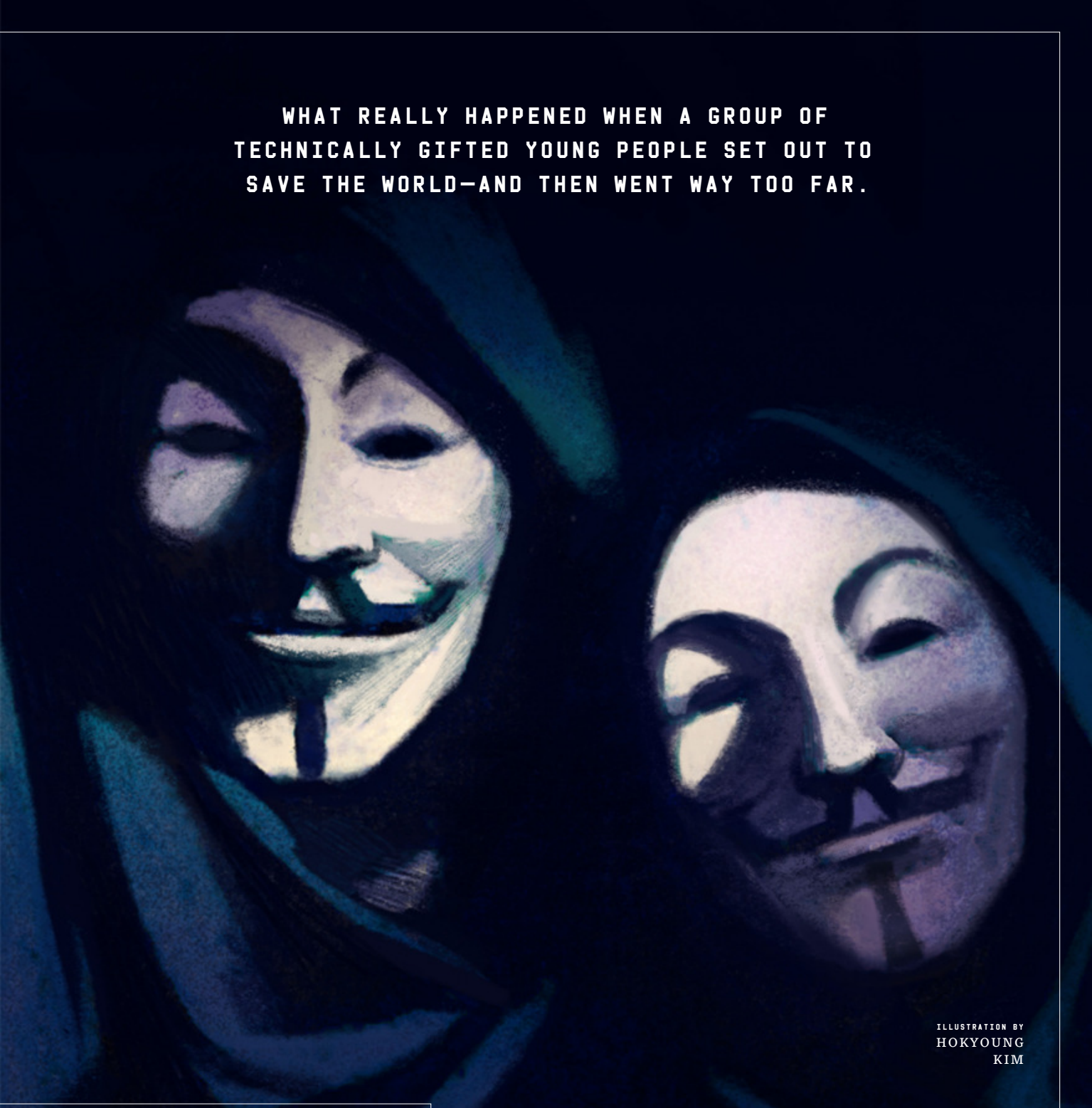


ILLUSTRATION BY HOKYOUNG KIM

The responses you receive depend on the prompts you compose. Ask the question one way, and you might elicit a set of facts adhering to one reality: the emergence of the world's first AI-inflected death cult, whose obsessions over the prospect of a machine superintelligence eventually sent them spiraling into destruction. Tweak the prompt, and you may produce an entirely different story: of a charismatic, deranged leader spreading a carefully engineered mania to followers seeking purpose in life. Try again, and you could get the tale of a vulnerable minority, driven to act at the extremes of their convictions by a society that rejects them.

But just like the outputs produced by our current AI oracles, some of these narratives turn out to be rife with hallucinations: plausible-*sounding* visions of reality, but fabricated to fill the need for a greater meaning. The trouble, as I went along, was separating the truth from the delirium. I wasn't always sure that I could. To be honest, I'm still not. But here we are, and a story has to start somewhere.

I

LET'S BEGIN ON AN AFTERNOON in mid-November 2019, under the redwood canopy in Northern California, along a road called Bohemian Highway. It was a Friday, and Sergeant Brian Parks of the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office was on patrol near the town of Guerneville when a call came over his radio. Someone had dialed 911 from Westminster Woods, a wilderness camp and retreat center about 8 miles away. The caller reported that a group of people had driven up and blocked the camp's entrance and exit with their vehicles. They'd gotten out and begun some kind of demonstration, clad in black robes and masks.

Sonoma sheriffs occasionally encounter protesters at Bohemian Grove, a secretive men's club for powerful elites that also meets in the redwoods near Guerneville, but the county was "not a hotbed" for that sort of thing, Parks says. So he thought to himself, "I'm just going to roll that way," and steered his car toward Westminster Woods.

The camp was hosting two groups of visitors that day. One was an alumni gathering for a nonprofit called the Center for Applied Rationality. The Bay Area group ran workshops dedicated to "developing clear thinking for the sake of humanity's future," as they put it. People within and around CFAR, which tended to attract a cohort of young, technically adept seekers, often called themselves simply "the rationalists." CFAR was itself an outgrowth of another organization, the Machine Intelligence Research Institute, devoted to the technical endeavor of creating artificial intelligence that wouldn't destroy the world.

Both CFAR and MIRI were the brainchildren of Eliezer Yudkowsky, the now famous researcher and AI pessimist. In recent years the two organizations had become intertwined with a third, the effective altruists. This philanthropically minded group had initially focused on maximizing the value in charitable giving but had increasingly taken on MIRI's views—that the existential risk, or x-risk, posed by "unfriendly" AI trumped all of humanity's other problems. In the rationalist world, CFAR provided the grand thinking, MIRI the technical know-how, and EA the funding to save humans from being eradicated by runaway machines.

The other group at Westminster Woods that day was a class of 18 elementary schoolchildren attending a ropes course.

As Parks received updates over the radio, it was the presence of kids that upped the stakes for the sheriff's department. "The information I was receiving kind of started to raise the hairs on the back of my neck," he says. "Because it didn't seem consistent with your typical protest." A new 911 call reported that one of the demonstrators was carrying a gun.

Parks upgraded the police call to a "code 3"—a lights-and-sirens emergency—and requested more units as he sped toward the camp. He and one of his deputies, Joseph Ricks, pulled up to the entrance within moments of each other and found the driveway blocked by a red Prius. Down a short hill, Parks saw three figures in full-length black cloaks, wearing Guy Fawkes masks, pacing and chanting. He unholstered his gun.

This is roughly the point in the story when agreed-upon facts begin to dwindle. In Parks' account, which he relayed to me in the fall of 2023 at a local Starbucks, the protesters were speaking in unison. "Just stuff I didn't really understand, but it was somewhat rehearsed," he said. The group had printed flyers outlining their complaints against CFAR and MIRI. They alleged that MIRI had "paid out blackmail (using donor funds)" to quash sexual misconduct accusations and that CFAR's leader "discriminates against trans women." Other allegations were more esoteric. CFAR did not "appreciably develop novel rationality/mental tech." The path to avoiding extinction, they wrote, involved "escaping containment by society" through "mental autonomy" and "interhemispheric game theory."

Parks and Ricks ordered the protesters to get on the ground. As they did, each one called out for a same-gender pat-down, like one might request at an airport. All three were trans women, but Parks says he couldn't discern their genders because of the robes and masks. Regardless, "they were not going to get that luxury at that point in time," he told me. "It's like, well, we don't know if you're a boy or a girl and we gotta handcuff you." Parks' deputies subdued the three in prone positions, what Parks calls "a high-risk-type takedown" requiring more force than "a normal handcuffing style."

By now, the police had been told there might be five outsiders on the grounds, including one who was possibly carrying a hatchet. Many of the CFAR alumni hadn't even arrived at the site, having received emails from organizers that they shouldn't come. The children and their teachers had taken shelter in buildings on the property. As Parks and another deputy moved across a small bridge toward the camp, another robed figure approached them. When Parks yelled for them to put their hands up, he says, the protester—who was also a trans woman—fell onto her back, as if slipping on ice, then struggled briefly with a deputy while being cuffed.

Parks had ordered in a SWAT team, which proceeded to evacuate the children in an armored vehicle. With the help of a helicopter, the police spent hours searching the 200-acre complex for the fifth, armed protester. In the end, there wasn't one. "We later learned that it was actually a maintenance worker who had armed himself with the hatchet," Parks

THEY BECAME CONSUMED WITH THE STRUGGLE TO KEEP THE VESSEL SEAWORTHY. MARONED FOR DAYS AND WEEKS ONBOARD, PONDERING THEIR DETERIORATING SURROUNDINGS, THEY BEGAN CREATING THEIR OWN UNIQUE PHILOSOPHIES.

says. The original reports of protesters carrying weapons had also been false. One had a can of pepper spray, but none of them had a gun.

The four were transported, handcuffed, to a detention facility in nearby Santa Rosa. Both sides would agree on one final fact: that the protesters refused to cooperate, in any sense. "I know your face!" one said to the officers as they were bundled into the facility. "You are slavers. You are Nazis."

II

WHEN THE STORY OF THE protest broke in the local news the following day, it read at first like a kooky police blotter tale: robed figures among the redwoods, cops bumbling through the underbrush chasing a phantom accomplice. At the jail, though, the clash between the police and the protesters set in motion a story that would end with one demonstrator dead, one missing, one detained, and one on trial for murder.

The four protesters—Emma Borhanian, Gwen Danielson, Ziz LaSota, and Alex Leatham—had all been involved in various ways with the CFAR, MIRI, and EA communities. But they had refused to give their names to the cops, who eventually used fingerprints to identify them. This meant that in early stories about the arrests, LaSota and Leatham were deadnamed—identified by their birth names rather than their chosen ones.

To the Sheriff's Office this may have seemed a minor oversight, even an unavoidable one. These were, after all, the names the fingerprints had turned up. But it was the first crack in what would become a rhetorical and factual fissure between the official narrative and that of the protesters. They would be routinely deadnamed in court documents and proceedings, even by their own attorneys in conversations with me. (In this story, where possible, I'm using their given family names, which none officially changed to my knowledge, and their chosen first names and pronouns, as far as I can discern from their statements and writing. However, I do quote public officials and records that refer to trans people by the pronouns they were assigned at birth.)

To the extent that the group had a collective identity, they would come to be known in the rationalist community as "the Zizians." To the extent they had a leader, it would be perceived as Ziz LaSota. The members of the group never seemed to adopt this name themselves, nor would they accept its implications: that they were a group at all, that they had a leader. But to the people they'd splintered off from, it appeared that all troubles flowed back to LaSota.

LaSota was a 28-year-old software developer who had grown up in Alaska. By her own description, she was technically gifted from a young age. "My friends and family, even if they think I'm weird, don't seem to be really bothered by the fact that I'm weird," she wrote in 2014, in the comments of a post on LessWrong.com, the online forum that serves as a discussion hub for rationalist thought. "But one thing I can tell you is that I used to de-emphasize my weirdness around them, and then I stopped, and found that being unapologetically weird is a lot more fun."

LaSota began "reading up on EA and x-risk," she wrote later, as an undergraduate in computer engineering at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. That's also when she was "starting to donate to MIRI." She interned at the software giant Oracle and at NASA, developing a tool for space weather analysis. But around the time she graduated, she began to wonder whether she should commit to graduate school in computer science or pursue a job as a computer engineer and "earn to give"—the effective altruism term for making as much money as possible in order to donate it. (The concept is now most attached to convicted fraudster Sam Bankman-Fried, but at the time it was still novel, as the EA movement took off in the Bay Area.)

LaSota writes that she contacted Anna Salamon, the executive director of CFAR, to ask for advice. According to LaSota's account, Salamon "said actually I should go to grad school, find a startup cofounder, drop out and earn to give via startups instead." (Salamon declined to comment for this story.) After attending grad school for a while and then dropping out—without snagging a cofounder—LaSota moved to the Bay Area and worked for a gaming company, then a biological instruments startup.

Disenchanted with what she viewed as the hollowness of startup culture, LaSota turned to the rationalists for answers. Since the early 2000s, when Yudkowsky had started gathering like-minded individuals to warn about the dangers of AI, the community had evolved from a largely technical movement to a social one. At workshops, in group houses, and on LessWrong.com, rationalists engaged in extended philosophical debate about AI, game theory, the singularity (the moment in time when a superintelligence surpasses humans and escapes our control), and how to live a more rational life.

Much of their discussion, online and off, was obscure. Partly this was the result of the technical concepts in AI. But the arcane language around "infohazards," "basilisks," or "Schelling points" also served a more exclusive purpose. It was a lexicon for acceptance into a kind of priesthood, a self-declared bulwark against the destruction of humanity itself.

LaSota dove into the debates, sometimes passionately enough to alarm her fellow rationalists—many of whom she increasingly regarded, in at least one respect, as morally repellent. "I'd been a vegan first," she later wrote, "and my primary concern upon learning about the singularity was how do I make this benefit all sentient life, not just humans. I described my feelings towards flesh-eating monsters, who had created hell on Earth [for] more people than those they had helped." (In Ziz's writing, anyone who eats meat is a "flesh-eating monster.")

In 2016, LaSota attended an eight-day CFAR program called the Workshop on AI Safety Strategy. One event included a session of "doom circles," she later wrote, where each participant "took turns having everyone else bluntly but compassionately say why they were doomed." The session elicited difficult soul-searching from LaSota about whether she was "morally valuable" and "net positive" to Earth. "When it was my turn," LaSota wrote, "I said my doom was that I could succeed at the things I tried, succeed exceptionally well, like I bet I could in 10 years have earned to give like 10 million dollars through startups, and it would still be too little too late, and ultimately the world would still burn."

III

THE ZIZIANS CAME TOGETHER over the next two years, splintering off one by one from the established rationalist and EA communities. Gwen Danielson, a high-achieving prep school graduate from Washington state who'd studied electrical engineering, math, and cognitive science at Rice University, met LaSota in the mid-2010s. They bonded over their experiences in the soul-sucking Bay Area real estate market, which often shunted rationalist-curious arrivals into toxic group-living situations or debt. "Most of the money donated by earn-to-givers [was] going to landlords," Danielson wrote. "We both recognized housing as one of the most obvious problems with the Bay area rationalist community."

In 2016 the pair began living together on a small sailboat Danielson owned, in the Berkeley Marina. LaSota, after learning some sailing basics, bought her own 24-foot boat for $600 off Craigslist. She named it the *Black Cygnet* and began living on it. From there, the pair decided to expand their life at sea and create "a federated fleet of boats" that would provide housing for rationalists "to improve the rate of work on AI safety." They'd call it the Rationalist Fleet. Danielson, LaSota, and a third comrade purchased a 70-year-old Navy tugboat that had been christened *Caleb*, and LaSota traveled to Alaska to sail it down, together with acquaintances she'd recruited online.

Ninety-four feet long and striped with rust, the boat was fraught with problems. LaSota and Danielson managed to reach the Bay Area with it but had trouble finding a cheap place to anchor. They became consumed with the struggle to keep the vessel seaworthy. Marooned for days and weeks onboard, they began creating their own philosophies. "We've been somewhat isolated from the rationalist community for a while," LaSota wrote to a correspondent at the time, "and in the course developed a significant chunk of unique art of rationality and theories of psychology aimed at solving our problems."

As LaSota articulated it, their goals had moved beyond real estate into a more grandiose realm. "We are trying to build a cabal," she wrote. The aim was "to find abnormally intrinsically good people and turn them all into Gervais-sociopaths." (The Gervais principle, articulated by the writer Venkatesh Rao—based on an extensive but light-hearted analysis of *The Office*—is a theory that at the top of any organization are "sociopaths" who know how to acquire and manipulate power. Beneath them are the loyal "clueless" and the disaffected "losers.") Sociopathy, LaSota wrote, would allow the group's members to operate "unpwned by the external world."

"Gervais-sociopaths" was a foundational concept in LaSota's increasingly tangled ideology. On her blog, at Sinceriously.fyi, she outlined that ideology across 100,000 words over several years, on topics ranging from engineering, to psychological manipulation, to gender theory, to the future motivations of a superior artificial intelligence.

I have read this corpus in its entirety more than once, and attempting to summarize LaSota's or Zizian thought by quoting from it is an almost impossible exercise. It would be akin to explaining a person's life by examining remnants of charred photos salvaged from a house consumed by fire. To a reader unstudied in rationalist-inflected thought—and even to many at the time who were—the blog could read like the work of an intelligent but unhinged mind:

- *Good is at an inherent disadvantage in epistemic drinking contests. But we have an advantage: I am actually willing to die to advance good.*
- *At one point, I saw a married couple, one of them doing AI alignment research, who were planning to have a baby. They agreed that the researcher would also sleep in the room with the crying baby in the middle of the night, not to take any load off the other. Just a signal of some kind. Make things even. And I realized that I was no longer able to stand people.*
- *Liches have trouble thinking clearly about paths through probability space that conflict with their phylactery, and the more conjunctive a mission it is to make true their phylactery, the more bits of epistemics will be corrupted by their refusal to look into that abyss.*

However opaque LaSota's ideology may have seemed to outsiders, some members of the rationalist world felt its pull—including her shipmate Danielson, Emma Borhanian, and Alex Leatham. Borhanian was a former Google engineer; Leatham had studied mathematics at UC Berkeley and UCLA. To them, the normies who dismissed Ziz were no different than the friends and family who failed to see the risks of AI superintelligence.

LaSota and her compatriots, who'd bought into the need for sentient life to be saved from AI, increasingly found MIRI and CFAR insufficiently committed to that mission. "They are obviously not taking heroic responsibility for the out-

come of this world," Danielson wrote. At best, the Bay Area organizations were doing "niche research." At worst, they were actively corrupt, even abusive. LaSota and those in her orbit alleged that CFAR and its leadership were laced with anti-trans beliefs and practices. ("That's preposterous," one member of the rationalist community, who is also trans, told me. "Rationalists have the most trans people of any group I've seen that isn't explicitly about being trans. You'd just show up at a math event or house party, and it would be 20 percent trans.")

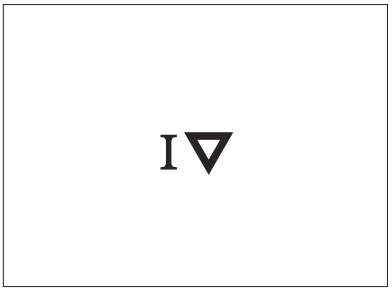
Within the labyrinth of LaSota's writing, even the most perplexed reader could locate the essence of her aspiration: to attain a hero's role, with an unassailable moral code. She yearned for action in support of that code, the kind of action that most humans—and rationalists—lacked the moral fortitude to pursue.

So the group set about trying to "install" new "mental tech," as they described it, to "jailbreak" their minds from convention. They began wearing all black, identifying their philosophy as "vegan anarchotranshumanism" and their spiritual beliefs as "vegan sith." ("The Sith do what they want deep down," LaSota explained. "They remove all obstructions to that.")

Danielson developed an elaborate psychological theory around brain hemispheres, soon taken up by LaSota. A person's core consisted of two hemispheres, each one intrinsically good or nongood. In extremely rare cases they could be "double good"—a condition that, it so happened, LaSota identified in herself. A person's two hemispheres could be at war with each other, but it was possible to gain awareness and even control of them through a process called "debucketing." LaSota and Danielson began experimenting with something they called "unihemispheric sleep," which they believed allowed them to put portions of their brain into slow wave sleep while remaining consciously awake. It was, LaSota wrote, "a means of keeping restless watch while alone."

In their four months on the boat, however, LaSota and Danielson's theorizing seemed to outpace their seafaring skills. In November 2017, the Coast Guard had to retrieve *Caleb* after the 345-ton tug dragged its anchor and collided with other boats in the harbor, while carrying hundreds of gallons of oily bilge water. Ultimately the vessel became too expensive to maintain, and the group abandoned it. "After Rationalist Fleet I updated away from boats being a good idea for housing," Danielson wrote, "in favor of well-outfitted stealth RVs."

For now, the friends seemed scattered and vulnerable, with tenuous housing and social worlds in flux. "I was kind of homeless," Leatham later wrote of the time. But they were increasingly united around the idea of taking action. "I de-facto lead without authority," LaSota wrote. "Real leaders don't need authority."



BY THE DAY OF THE CFAR reunion at Westminster Woods, in November 2019, the schism between the rationalist mothership and LaSota's small faction had taken a more aggressive turn. The splinter group had suggested they could sue over what they believed to be anti-trans discrimination by CFAR's leaders and had become verbally confrontational online and at CFAR meetups.

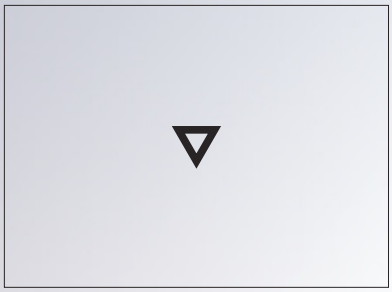
To the larger rationalist community, their writing seemed increasingly unhinged, even threatening. "Vengeance and justice are in the hands of anyone who wants it," Leatham wrote. "You don't need to appeal to anyone to take revenge." Salamon, CFAR's executive director, later wrote on Facebook that she'd begun to feel "extreme fear" toward LaSota. She recalled that LaSota had posted to Discord, "If MIRI attempts to silence me using governmental force … that would be physical violence. If they escalate to physical violence, we are prepared to perform self-defense."

There were Byzantine levels to this inter-community drama that defy summary, played out across endless threads on Discord, LessWrong, and Tumblr. As self-described vegan Siths, LaSota and Danielson expressed outrage that MIRI's efforts to create human-friendly AI didn't seem to include other animals in the equation.

The group had become fixated on a particular rumor, namely that the nonprofit MIRI had potentially used donor money to pay off a former staffer. The ex-employee had launched a website accusing MIRI leaders of statutory rape and a coverup. Though the facts were never litigated in a courtroom, MIRI's president wrote in 2019 that he had checked "some of the most serious allegations" and "found them to be straightforwardly false." The website's owner had agreed to retract the claims and take the site down, the president said, under conditions that were confidential. But what angered LaSota and Danielson was as much the idea—in their minds at least—that the nonprofit had succumbed to blackmail as the allegations themselves. In negotiating, they believed, the organization had violated one of its fundamental principles: "timeless decision theory," a concept developed by MIRI cofounder Eliezer Yudkowsky. (Yudkowsky, who later renamed it "functional decision theory," declined to comment for this story.)

Without getting mired in the details, suffice it to say: Timeless decision theory asserts that, in making a decision, a person should consider not just the outcome of that choice but also their own underlying patterns of reasoning—and those of their past and future selves (not least because these patterns might one day be anticipated by an omniscient, adversarial AI). LaSota, in her writing, seems to have interpreted this metaphysical game as a call to operate "timelessly"—to treat one's choices as if they affected the fate of all sentient life across temporal horizons. Under this line of thinking, one should never back down or surrender, no matter what. In any case, the Zizians believed that timeless decision theorists are supposed to resist blackmail, and they perceived this purported betrayal of principle as deeper than the crime itself.

According to Danielson's later writing, the group planned a series of talks to communicate all of this at the Westminster Woods reunion. Days before, however, CFAR's leadership barred Danielson and LaSota from attending. So they arrived instead in their robes and masks, three-page flyers in hand. "MIRICFAR betrayed us," the flyers read in part. "It is not what it once seemed like it would become. New things can be built."



FOLLOWING THEIR ARRESTS, each of the four spent several days in jail before bailing out. Prosecutors charged them with five misdemeanors, for crimes like false imprisonment of the campers, willful cruelty to a child, and wearing a mask for an "unlawful purpose." They added a felony, for conspiracy, that carried the threat of serious prison time.

LaSota and the other three, on their blogs and in legal briefs, cast themselves as the victims. In their defense filings, the group argued that they'd traveled to Westminster Woods "to protest the cover-up of the sexual abuse of minors" by CFAR. They couldn't have known that the schoolchildren would also be on the property or that camp staffers would interpret their protest as an active shooter situation. They accused the police of filing false reports and the county district attorney of "malicious prosecution" on "trumped-up criminal charges."

"DO YOU KNOW WHETHER ZIZ OWNS OR HAS EASY ACCESS TO ANY WEAPONS?" ONE RATIONALIST WROTE ON FACEBOOK. "DOES SHE CURRENTLY HAVE A PLAN TO OBTAIN A WEAPON?"

"Don't we know by now that the word of a cop isn't worth shit?" Michelle Zajko, a young trans rationalist who hadn't attended the protest, wrote later. The false gun claim and police presence, she wrote, were "a fairly standard example of a phenomenon called 'swatting' where someone deceives emergency services into sending police."

The group hired a lawyer and filed a civil rights complaint against the Sonoma County authorities on the grounds that they'd been subjected to excessive force and that their requests for same-gender searches had been ignored. At the jail, the complaint alleged, the group had their clothing "forcibly stripped off their bodies." They said the officers then "crowded around to look at the Claimants' genitals and naked bodies." They were then "tortured," they said, "woken whenever they started to fall asleep … and were kept naked and cold for days."

With the arrival of the pandemic, both cases slowed to a crawl, and the group seemed to grow more isolated and inward-looking. They were banned from LessWrong.com, along with various CFAR meetups and conferences. An anonymous rationalist launched a site, Zizians.info, branding them "the Zizians" for the first time and warning that the group was a cult. The page, which LaSota called "a rationalist smear site," alleged that LaSota's unihemispheric sleep practices had led to the 2018 suicide of a trans woman attached to the group, Maia Pasek. (LaSota wrote that unihemispheric sleep "did not doom Pasek." But her own description of her interactions with Pasek, titled "Pasek's Doom" and including lines like "We each went on our journey of jailbreaking into psychopathy fully" and "Pasek's right hemisphere had been 'mostly-dead,'" did little to rebut the accusations.)

Whatever thread of attachment they'd felt to the rationalists was snapped by the response to the protests. "'Rationalists' are so evil," Leatham wrote. "i dont know how to express how evil they are. many of them are just authoritarians … Not a single 'rationalist' cisfem stood up for me … i wont forget this."

Parts of the rationalist community had become increasingly concerned about what LaSota and her acolytes might do next. "Do you know whether Ziz owns or has easy access to any weapons?" one member wrote on Facebook. "Does she currently have a plan to obtain a weapon?" A moderator on LessWrong wrote that "both Ziz and Gwen have a sufficient track record of being aggressive offline (and Ziz also online) that I don't really want them around on LessWrong or to provide a platform to them." CFAR hired professional security, and "a lot of people for quite a while were hesitant to show up to larger events," Oliver Habryka, then the lead administrator for LessWrong and an organizer of in-person rationalist gatherings, told me. "The location of events would only be announced last-minute."

In turn, LaSota and the others wrote of vengeance against the "timeless" decisions of others. "If you truly irreconcilably disagree with someone's creative choice, i.e. their choice extending arbitrarily far into the past and future, ultimately your only recourse is to kill them," one LaSota ally wrote in a long blog post citing Ziz's philosophies. In the comments, LaSota wrote, "I am so fucking glad to finally have an equal."

In the spring of 2021, a rationalist named Jay Winterford, who went by the name Fluttershy, died by suicide. Winterford had spent time on *Caleb* with LaSota and Danielson, where LaSota had described trying to "fix/upgrade" him, and for years he seemingly grappled with LaSota's ideas as a way out of childhood traumas. To rationalist watchers of the group, Winterford seemed to constitute a second casualty of its ideology.

In court, by summer 2021, the four had turned against their own defense lawyers, accusing one of misconduct. A month later, representing herself, Leatham filed to have state judge Shelly Averill disqualified from the case on the grounds that she had "repeatedly misgendered me and my codefendants, including twice under penalty of perjury." (Judge Averill admitted to misgendering Leatham but replied that she did not "misspeak intentionally or in any way intend to cause party offense." A higher court ruled against Leatham.)

Another Leatham filing included numbered objections like "2. Shelly Averill is evil." "3. Shelly Averill has read my previous accusation that she is evil and has not denied that she is evil." "5. … Shelly Averill has omnicidal intent—she wants

to destroy everything—especially prioritizing that which is good." And "11. I will never be a man, no matter how much humans like Shelly Averill want to eradicate that truth from existence."

When their civil rights complaint for harassment and torture was thrown out, the four filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against the police and two administrators at Westminster Woods—whom they accused of fabricating the claim that one of them was armed, in order to prompt a stronger police response. They again asserted that the police had infringed on their speech, sexually assaulted them, and denied them food and medication in custody, amounting to torture. The police opposed a subpoena to release any video from the jail, calling them "privileged" files that would constitute "an undue burden" to sort through.

Even mired in their ongoing legal battles, the group still seemed to be expanding. Now hovering around the Zizian orbit was a figure named Alice Monday—whom LaSota had described as "sort of a mentor to me"—and Michelle Zajko, the young rationalist who compared the Westminster Woods response to a swatting. She was trans nonbinary and a recent bioinformatics master's graduate from Pennsylvania. By the spring of 2022, an EA adherent and recent UC Berkeley student with chunky black glasses named Daniel Blank was also around. Blank, a cisgender man whose blog showed him captivated by LaSota's ideas, was noted in the court file as having hand-delivered one of Leatham's documents to the court.

A few weeks later, after Danielson failed to show up for a hearing, Averill issued a bench warrant for her arrest. Then, at a hearing of the federal lawsuit, on August 19, the group's attorney asked for a stay in the case. He said he believed that Gwen Danielson had died by suicide.

One half of the founding Zizian brain trust was apparently gone. The other was soon to vanish as well.

∇I

OUT ON THE WATERS OF SAN Francisco Bay that night of August 19, 2022, it was balmy and breezy, with a light swell. At 11:05, the Coast Guard command center in San Francisco received a distress call from a woman on a boat traveling south across the bay. The woman, Naomi LaSota, reported that her 31-year-old brother had fallen overboard, somewhere south of the Bay Bridge. Naomi, Ziz, and Borhanian had gone out for an afternoon sail on Ziz LaSota's boat, the *Black Cygnet*. As they were heading back to the marina, Naomi reported, her brother—as she referred to Ziz in her communications with the Coast Guard—had leaned over the motor and fallen in.

According to official Coast Guard logs obtained through a Freedom of Information Act Request, Naomi said her brother had not been wearing a life preserver, and she was "unable to determine exact location or area where brother fell overboard due to unfamiliarity with the boat."

The Coast Guard deployed in force, knowing that time was of the essence. All available boats, helicopters, planes, and drones launched into action, including the marine rescue units of the Oakland and Alameda fire departments.

The crews searched through the night, obtaining "fatigue waivers" to forgo their normal shifts. They ran patterns through the Bay out under the Golden Gate Bridge, from Yerba Buena Island all the way to Land's End and back down the shore through San Francisco. They returned with only "negative results," in search-and-rescue-speak. There was no sign of the person who'd fallen overboard.

At 3 am, LaSota's sister called for help again. After the Coast Guard boats had moved on to where LaSota might have drifted, the other two had no idea how to sail back, and the *Black Cygnet* was now drifting near some rocks. A Coast Guard unit was diverted from the search to tow it into a marina. At around 5 pm, after 18 hours, the Coast Guard told LaSota's family that they were suspending the search. Their computer modeling, they said, showed LaSota could not have survived that long in the water.

More than two weeks later, an obituary appeared for LaSota in The Daily News-Miner, in Fairbanks. "Loving adventure, friends and family, music, blueberries, biking, computer games and animals, you are missed," it read. That November, Naomi filed to obtain a death certificate for LaSota, with affidavits from herself and Borhanian recounting the incident, both of them using LaSota's given, legal name. "No friends or family," she wrote, had seen or heard from LaSota since August 19, 2022.

ON THE MORNING OF THE 13TH, LIND LATER ALLEGED, DAO LURED HIM OUT TO THEIR TRAILER BY SAYING THERE WAS A WATER LEAK, AND THEN MULTIPLE FIGURES STABBED HIM WITH KITCHEN KNIVES.

VII

WITH LASOTA AND DANIELSON both presumed dead, the Zizian ideology started to feel like an afterthought in the rationalist community. Even before Danielson's reported suicide and LaSota's disappearance, some of the leading lights of rationalist thinking had taken to LessWrong to publicly discuss what the experiences around Ziz had meant, as if she no longer existed. "Ziz tried to create an anti-CFAR/MIRI splinter group whose members had mental breakdowns," Scott Alexander, the author of the prominent Slate Star Codex blog, wrote in a lengthy discussion of MIRI, CFAR, and other mental health incidents that had taken place in the community. Another poster wrote: "The splinter group seems to have selected for high scrupulosity and not attenuated its mental impact."

As for others who had been part of LaSota's Bay Area circle, Michelle Zajko and Alice Monday appeared to have moved to the East Coast. Voter rolls from 2022 show them residing in Coventry, Vermont, on a 20-acre wooded property in an unfinished house, purchased more than one year earlier through an anonymous trust.

The two remaining Westminster Woods protesters, Borhanian and Leatham, had taken up a precarious residence on a property in Vallejo, northeast of San Francisco. Owned by an 80-year-old former shipworker and crane operator named Curtis Lind, the fenced-off land was pressed up against a steep hillside. Dotted with box trucks, decommissioned boats, and piles of junk, it gave the impression of a salvage yard. It was in a rough corner of town, a friend of Lind's recalled—the site of drug dealings and shootings. On the opposite side of the hill was a waterfront featuring derelict boats and a regular homeless encampment.

Lind had decided to monetize the property; he brought in RVs and shipping containers and took on tenants. But the property lacked water or electricity. According to the friend, Lind had once blown out the neighborhood transformer by tapping it for power.

Borhanian and Leatham lived in an RV on the property and remained occupied with fighting the charges stemming from the protest. Each court filing of Leatham's, who was by now attempting to represent herself, became harder to follow. In September 2022 she filed one titled "Notion of Motion and Motion to Dismiss the Imposter Police Officer From all Conflicting Positions on this Case, Including but not Limited to Their Witnessed Reincarnations as Judge and District Attorney."

There were other characters hanging around Borhanian and Leatham at the property, including a mysterious blond woman and another young rationalist later known as Suri Dao—who identified as "bi-gender" and blogged that she "preferred either she/her or he/him pronouns." The group's lease had been arranged years before by Gwen Danielson. But Lind claimed that no one had paid rent in years. By October he'd won a $60,000 judgment against the group and was working to evict them.

What took place between the remaining group and Lind one Sunday morning that November would once again bisect reality into two irreconcilable versions. According to the account that Lind gave police—and that his tenant Patrick McMillan gave the local news—the group learned that the county sheriff would be pursuing the eviction on November 15. On the morning of the 13th, Lind later alleged, Dao lured him out to their trailer by saying there was a water leak, then multiple figures stabbed him with kitchen knives more than a dozen times, including through the eye. At some point Lind pulled a gun, and Leatham allegedly ran a samurai sword through his left shoulder and out from his stomach. Lind fired, killing Borhanian and wounding Leatham at least twice.

McMillan claimed he awoke to a knock at his door and found Lind standing at his trailer with the sword still protruding from his body. "He said, 'I'm dying!' and he had blood squirting out of him," McMillan told a local TV news reporter a few days later. "I guess they figured if they killed him, they couldn't be evicted."

When the police arrived, they found Borhanian dead, Leatham with gunshot wounds, and Lind bleeding from his eye with a sword sticking through his chest. The cops arrested Dao at the scene, while Leatham and Lind were both transported to the hospital. The blond friend of the group, who police said gave her name as Julia Dawson, was taken to the station for questioning. But after having what appeared to be a medical emergency, she

was sent to the hospital as well. From there, she quietly slipped away.

When Leatham recovered from her injuries enough for the case to proceed, she and Dao were charged with the attempted murder of Lind and the felony murder of their own friend, Borhanian. (Although Lind had pulled the trigger, California law allows prosecutors to essentially charge instigators of a conflict with any murder that results from it.) Lind, among other injuries, lost an eye.

At least in the small group of supporters who showed up for Dao and Leatham at court hearings, another version of events took hold. Lind, according to this story, had been threatening and harassing the tenants for months, and that morning had entered their home and shot them unprompted. (It's unclear, in this account, how Lind was stabbed through the chest and eye.) "Emma was no harm to anything or anyone," a person close to Borhanian said in a 2022 interview, alleging that Lind's story had changed over

time. The group was being presumed guilty because they were neurodiverse, she said. "This man ended the life of this brilliant, brilliant woman."

As the murder charges entered their long slog through the California courts, the other cases involving the original four protesters fell away. The protest charges were put on hold, and the group's attorney in the federal civil rights lawsuit—which alleged the four were "tortured" after Westminster Woods—was preparing to withdraw from the case, saying he could no longer reach his clients. (The case was later dismissed.)

Two days after the sword attack, the Vallejo police contacted the Coast Guard command center to follow up on its missing boater case. One of the people who'd been on the boat when LaSota went missing, Emma Borhanian, had been shot and killed in the Lind attack, they reported. But they had another startling discovery to share. LaSota herself was alive and had been living in Vallejo "for the past six months," the detective said. Julia Dawson, the woman who'd slipped away from the hospital, was Ziz LaSota.

VIII

MICHELLE ZAJKO GREW UP IN an upscale neighborhood in the town of Chester Heights, Pennsylvania, just southwest of Philadelphia. A sharp and creative student who penned her own fantasy stories, she first became involved in the effective altruism movement as an undergraduate biology major at nearby Cabrini University, bringing an EA discussion group to campus. "I want to help save people for my career, but this is a way I can do it now," she told her college newspaper in 2013. The same year, Zajko presented a paper about applying Bayesian decision theory in everyday life. "Because people maintain consistency in their beliefs, they often continue to make the same decisions, even if those decisions are not optimal," she wrote. "Structuring one's decisionmaking strategies in accordance with mathematics and decision theory would result in outcomes that grant higher expected utility than using no strategies." She earned a master's degree in bioinformatics from Temple University and worked as an intern at NASA and at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

By 2019, Zajko—known as Jamie in Ziz-connected circles—relocated to California, where she entered the rationalist social scene and started dating Alice Monday. (Monday couldn't be located for this story.) Monday was a controversial figure, accused on multiple blogs of physically and mentally abusing her housemates. Alex Leatham wrote that "about once a week for several months [Monday] would take a length of bamboo and beat my friend emma with it. this is their attempted new order."

Monday never responded publicly to the accusations, and Zajko seemed not to have complaints of her own. "I had spoken with her while she was out in California, and she was very happy," her aunt Rosanne Zajko told me. "She said that she and her girlfriend, Alice, would be moving to Vermont." The Bay Area was expensive—"I think she used the word 'soul-crushing,'" Rosanne said, "and they were looking for a change of scenery." Monday and Zajko relocated together to Vermont by early 2021.

The Vermont property was isolated, just 20 miles from the Canadian border. "Long driveway and mountain top setting is really what sets this apart from most homes, total solitude," a real estate listing noted. Rosanne says that Zajko became increasingly estranged from her family after she arrived in Vermont—an estrangement Rosanne attributes to Zajko's California friends, including LaSota. "Michelle is a very, very intelligent person," Rosanne said. "She's always been a very independent thinker, someone who is intellectually curious. I see how she goes out there and wants to learn more, but how she actually got to fall under the influence of that group is something I do not understand and I have no answers for."

In her online writings, Zajko expressed growing concern about anti-trans sentiments she saw in the news. "We're already past the start of a trans genocide," she wrote on her Tumblr in 2022. "If you don't own a gun, consider getting one, learning to shoot it, and investigating community self-defense. Fascist militias are an arm of the anti-trans genocide who are acting as low-level enforcers." She also alluded to what she described as past "abuse" by her parents. They'd threatened to go to a judge friend and have her put in foster care, even kill her if she ran away, she wrote. She said she'd "tried explain-

ing" it to her aunt, Rosanne. "She sadly didn't believe me," Zajko wrote. "Some people don't want to hear about the ugliness in the world, because then they'd feel obligated to do something about it."

Rosanne's recollection of these same events, and of Zajko's parents, was irreconcilable with what her niece wrote. Some time after seeing the posts, she emailed Michelle. "I take issue with one of your posts where you said I knew about abuse but preferred to do nothing," Rosanne wrote. "That was a huge surprise to me. I felt that you stabbed me in the back with that comment." Rosanne had been a witness to disputes between Michelle and her parents, she said—even taken Michelle's side—but said the arguments she knew of never amounted to anything approaching abuse. "Did she express to me any resentment or anger or hate against her parents? Not at all."

In 2021, Michelle Zajko bought another half acre of land in Derby, 15 miles from Coventry. It's unclear how long Monday and Zajko stayed together in Vermont. But in February 2022, Zajko blogged about having had long conversations with LaSota. The latter had accused Zajko of, essentially, gossiping about her with Monday and playing mind games. "Ziz informed me that the only way I could gain her trust and make up for what I did to her," Zajko alleged, "was to murder Alice." LaSota, according to the post, had told her how to construct a DIY suppressor for a gun and suggested lye to get rid of the body. "And if I didn't do it," she wrote, "Ziz planned to drive across the entire continental United States to murder me."

Zajko seemed to vacillate between suspecting it might all be a rhetorical game and genuinely believing Ziz intended to kill her and Monday. "Ziz, like myself, does not forgive or forget, not even after years have passed," she wrote. "While I have the tenacity, skill, and willingness to evade Ziz and her friends indefinitely, it's a waste of resources. We're currently facing the collapse of civilization, a looming civil war, unfriendly AI, and a fuckton of other threats, and instead of focusing on those, we're wasting resources respectively hunting and evading each other."

The conversation seemed unresolved. But between musings on *Dune* and Siths, Zajko drew what would later come to feel like a crucial distinction: between "the world where I'm a complete psycopath [sic]," killing to please Ziz, and the one "where I kill my abuser."

RITA AND RICHARD ZAJKO'S LIFE WAS QUIET, ARRANGED AROUND A TIGHT CIRCLE OF CONCERN. RITA'S PARENTS WERE ILL AND LIVED NEARBY, AND A LOT OF RITA AND RICHARD'S TIME WAS TAKEN UP WITH CARING FOR THEM.

IX

BACK IN CHESTER HEIGHTS, Pennsylvania, Michelle Zajko's parents lived in the stately four-bedroom home they'd owned since the late 1980s. Richard and Rita Zajko had raised Michelle there, in a cul-de-sac development with other young families. Richard worked for a company that had a contract with the nearby Navy yard, while Rita stayed home. Now that the couple was in their late sixties and early seventies, their life was quiet, arranged around a tight circle of concern. Rita's parents were ill and lived nearby, said Rosanne, and a lot of Rita and Richard's time "was taken up in caring for them."

Toward the end of 2022, Rosanne had fallen into the habit of talking to Rita every Sunday. "We were both caregivers," she said—Rita for her parents, and now Rosanne for her husband, Rick's brother, who was on the verge of entering memory care. "It was grueling and draining," she said, and she knew Rita could understand.

"On December 31, I put it out there in the universe: Can 2023 be the year where I have no catastrophes?" Rosanne recalled thinking. "Can it be a good year?" The next morning she texted Rita to wish her a happy New Year but received no reply.

Three days later, Rosanne said, she got a call from another of Rick's brothers. "I don't know why he would be calling, but let me pick it up," she remembered thinking. "He just comes out with it and says 'Rick and Rita have been murdered.' "

Late on New Year's Eve, the police later determined, someone had killed the couple inside their home, shooting them each in the head with a 9mm handgun. There was no sign of a break-in, and the authorities quickly concluded that the assailant must be someone the couple knew. According to a search warrant application, Ring camera footage from across the street had captured a car pulling up to the house at 11:29 that night. Two minutes later, "a higher-pitched voice is heard shouting what sounds like 'Mom!' " followed by "Oh my god! Oh God! God!" Two figures are then recorded entering the house, then exiting nine minutes later and driving away.

The Zajkos, two sources familiar with the case later confirmed to me, had been killed in Michelle's childhood bedroom. December 31 was her birthday.

Rosanne was devastated. "I stayed on the floor," she says. "I wasn't comprehending it: How can this happen to Rita and Rick, of all people?" She wondered briefly why Michelle hadn't called to deliver the news. "Like, she has to know, but why didn't she call and tell us?" she remembers thinking. But then she thought: "How would I react if I got the news that both of my parents were murdered? I would be in shock."

THREE DAYS AFTER THE BODIES were discovered, on January 5, a pair of Pennsylvania state troopers traveled to Vermont to interview Michelle Zajko. They found her at the Coventry property, along with 24-year-old Daniel Blank—the rationalist from Berkeley who had once delivered court documents for Alex Leatham.

One of the troopers, Matthew Gibson, later testified that Zajko told them she was "uncertain of when she would come back to the Commonwealth in order to make final arrangements for her parents." According to the search warrant affidavit, she told the troopers she hadn't spoken to her parents since the previous January, that she'd been in Vermont with Blank on New Year's Eve, and that she hadn't been to Pennsylvania since before the Covid pandemic.

The officers asked Zajko if she had any guns on the property. She said they did, and retrieved a 9mm Smith & Wesson. Gibson testified that he "held it in Vermont" and "inspected it." Two sources also confirmed to me that the troopers had seen a shooting range on the property and that the Pennsylvania State Police had discovered that Zajko and the others had turned their phones off in the hours leading up to the murder, making it difficult to track their whereabouts. With no warrant to confiscate the gun, however, Gibson handed it back, and the officers returned home.

On January 9, the Pennsylvania State Police got a call from the medical examiner in Delaware County. Zajko had arrived, seeking death certificates for her parents. The police tracked her to a nearby hotel called Candlewood Suites, but waited to approach her again.

On the morning of January 12, Michelle arrived alone at the small graveside ceremony for her parents. Wearing a mask, she told Rosanne she'd been ill and didn't want to spread germs. Rosanne recalls her seeming paranoid, gesturing at some of Rick's former colleagues she didn't recognize. "Who are those men?" she asked.

Then, at 9 pm that evening, the police arrived at the hotel. They'd secured a warrant to obtain Zajko's DNA and search her hotel room and car for the Smith & Wesson—"believed to potentially be the murder weapon of Richard and Rita Zajko," Gibson testified.

When Zajko came to the door of her second-floor room, she acknowledged the officers but was slow to open it. The police used a key card to enter. They detained Zajko and took her down to the lobby, but as they passed through, she shouted at the hotel staff to tell Daniel Blank that she'd been arrested. "He's staying in room 111!" she said, according to Gibson. The trooper recognized Blank's name from the Vermont trip and gathered some officers to approach 111, which Blank had rented under the name "Daniel Black." When Gibson knocked on the door, Blank refused to open it and asked for a lawyer.

Instead, the officers left to obtain a warrant. They reviewed the previous night's footage from the Candlewood Suites security cameras and determined that Zajko had carried a bag down to room 111, knocked, and left it outside the door. A judge found it sufficient probable cause for a warrant, and the police returned to the hotel at 12:30 am. This time, when no one answered the door to 111, a vice unit breached the room. They heard the shower running and found Blank hiding in the bathroom—along with a blond-haired figure they hadn't expected, dressed in black.

Blank was thrown to the ground and cuffed. The other person in the room, whom troopers would later describe as being 6′ 2″ and 200 pounds, was sprawled on the bathroom floor. "He was just laying almost unconscious or as if he was dead on the ground," another trooper, Matthew Smith, later testified. Four officers carried this figure out of the room. In the lobby, a trooper physically placed the person's finger onto a mobile fingerprint scanner.

A hit came up for an open warrant, in California. It was for Ziz LaSota, under her birth name.

The troopers sent LaSota to the hospital, where doctors said there seemed to be nothing wrong with her. She was placed under arrest, then charged with disorderly conduct and interfering with a police investigation. The troopers searched Zajko's green 2013 Subaru, parked at the hotel, and discovered $40,000 in cash under the front passenger seat. In Blank's pocket they found a receipt for it, from a Bank of America branch in Vermont. (Later, surveillance footage from the branch would show Blank pacing back and forth as he awaited the money, then pulling out and unwrapping a cell phone covered in foil.)

In LaSota and Blank's room, 111, the police found a light-colored cloth bag containing a Smith & Wesson 9mm—with a serial number matching the one troopers had seen in Vermont—and five boxes of ammunition.

By that point, however, Blank and Zajko had been released. They never came back for the cash or the car. Only LaSota remained in custody.

XI

I STARTED ATTENDING LASOTA'S court hearings in May 2023, at a columned Pennsylvania courthouse in the town center of Media, just over 5 miles from Zajko's childhood home. Eighteen weeks after her arrest, LaSota remained in jail, a judge having initially set bail at $500,000—an inconceivable amount for two misdemeanors—before reducing it to $50,000. On an early May morning in Judge Richard Cappelli's courtroom, between a litany of DUIs and petty drug crimes, the clerk called the case.

LaSota appeared by video—there'd been a snafu with the prisoner-transportation system from the jail—but I couldn't see her face from where I was sitting in the gallery. Representing her in the courtroom was Daniel McGarrigle, an attorney with slicked-back gray hair and a trim beard. He'd come prepared to argue that the charges should be dismissed. The police hadn't come to Candlewood Suites to arrest or even investigate LaSota, he noted to me later, and closing one's eyes and lying on the floor was hardly typical "disorderly conduct." "Annoying or frustrating the police is not a crime," McGarrigle told me. As for the murders, he said, "I won't speak to rumors. I only speak to evidence. The evidence I've seen so far—that the Commonwealth has presented so far—has shown me that my client is not guilty of any crime in Pennsylvania."

On this morning, though, Cappelli adjourned the hearing until a date when the defendant could be transported to the courtroom. LaSota responded bitterly. "I've been here for four months," she said, "which I think is even longer than the suggested sentence. It's me languishing in jail for another week for no reason, so I'm not going to say I agree with it."

A few weeks later, LaSota finally appeared in person, in a forest green jumpsuit and handcuffs, her unkempt blond hair swept partly across her face and below her shoulders. She was wearing a blue surgical mask and sat rigidly still through the hearing, where the state countered McGarrigle's motion to quash the charges. Unlike the California courts, which made the occasional nod to the Zizians' chosen genders, in Pennsylvania LaSota was only "he." After testimony from troopers Gibson and Smith about the events at the Candlewood Suites, the prosecutor argued that LaSota had "recklessly created a risk and a hazardous condition to the troopers that had to physically remove a 6′2″, 200-pound man."

Behind these arguments lay a deeper motive: Unable to charge for the Zajko murders but suspecting that LaSota, Michelle Zajko, and Daniel Blank could be tied to them, prosecutors were trying desperately to hold LaSota while the police gathered evidence. "Obviously you realize we don't give a shit about this case," one local official familiar with it told me. What they were interested in was LaSota's involvement in the homicide.

Once out of jail, LaSota would be "in the wind," the official said. Authorities wouldn't see LaSota again until she resurfaced "in somebody else's prison."

But from another angle, the authorities seemed oddly passive about what already amounted to a kind of alleged crime spree. LaSota had an active bench warrant in Sonoma County, California, on the felony charge related to the protest. She'd arguably committed another crime in faking her death, since causing the Coast Guard to commit resources to save lives when no one is in danger is a federal felony—punishable by up to six years in prison. And according to the police in Vallejo, she'd fled the scene of the sword attack and shooting, making her at minimum a potential person of interest in a murder case. But no California law enforcement showed up in Pennsylvania looking to collect their charge or even to question her.

Even more strangely, perhaps, despite having found the Smith & Wesson in LaSota and Blank's hotel room, prosecutors never charged her in connection to the weapon. Under Pennsylvania law, it's illegal to possess a gun while a fugitive from justice. "I don't know that the charges would have had legs," the official told me, since the gun could have belonged to Blank. But in the court hearings on LaSota's bail, the discovery of the gun never even came up.

The only person I'd seen in the gallery who seemed tuned in to the hearings was a beefy fifty- or sixtysomething white-haired man, sporting a goatee and wearing a black polo. He gave off the vibe of a private investigator, and when I introduced myself he confirmed as much, declining to give his name. "You can call me … Cliff," he said, unconvincingly. We shared our bafflement at $500,000-to-$50,000 bail, and I asked why he was there. "Some people in California are interested in this case," he said. "They're afraid of this individual."

That fear was evident among some rationalists as news of the violent incidents surrounding LaSota spread. "I don't want Ziz to ever think about me, ever," a person involved in the Bay Area rationalist community said in an interview in 2023. "I think I know enough to be correctly scared of Ziz."

That June, Judge Cappelli ruled against quashing the charges but reduced LaSota's bail to $10,000, unsecured—meaning LaSota could sign a payment pledge and walk out. McGarrigle informed the court that LaSota's mother had flown in from Alaska, "and she will take him home and make sure he comes back for all the court dates." The prosecutor seemed skeptical. "The Commonwealth's concern is the flight," he told the judge. What were the odds LaSota would show up for the next court date, in late August?

Around the same time, Michelle Zajko called her aunt Rosanne. They hadn't spoken since the graveside service for Michelle's parents that January. She hadn't shown up at the memorial mass where Rosanne had eulogized Rita and Rick. But now Michelle was calling with a message: "She told me she wasn't responsible" for the murders, Rosanne said. "But she said that she knew who was." She told her aunt that "LessWrong did it" and that she was "being targeted."

Not long after, the trust that owned the house in Coventry, Vermont, where Michelle had lived with Alice Monday, sold it off. Michelle and Blank were both gone, having left the previous winter. When realtors came to inspect the property, they found the house had not been winterized, causing the pipes to burst. One of Blank's family members, meanwhile, filed a national missing persons report, noting that he had last been seen in Pennsylvania, wore thick glasses, and had one eye that didn't follow the other.

When LaSota's court appearance came,

on the morning of August 21, 2023, the courtroom gallery was full of defendants waiting to be called for the day's pleas. Shortly after court was gaveled into session, an older woman with gray-blond hair pushed a wheelchair into the back of the courtroom. In it, slumped to one side and dressed in flowing black, was LaSota. Now her hair too was black and even more disheveled than when she'd been in jail. She was wearing what appeared to be an industrial N95 respirator mask, with valves on either side. McGarrigle, approaching his client in the back of the courtroom, seemed surprised. "What's going on?" he said, leaning in. "I mean, what's going on with your health?"

When LaSota's case was called, the woman I later learned was LaSota's mother wheeled her to the front, where she sat impassively in the chair, gazing blankly at the floor.

A new prosecutor had replaced the old one and requested a continuance to get on top of all the facts. The judge assented, pushing the trial to December. "I just want the record to reflect that the defendant is here, and we're ready," McGarrigle said, before LaSota's mother wheeled her back out through the doors.

I WAS CERTAIN THE STORY AS I UNDERSTOOD IT WAS INCOMPLETE BUT UNSURE WHERE TO LOOK TO COMPLETE IT. OR, IF I DID, WHETHER I COULD TELL IT WITHOUT ATTRACTING THE BASILISK'S GAZE MYSELF.

XII

TWO MONTHS LATER, I TRAVELED to Sonoma County, the home of Westminster Woods and the scene of the protest that had seemingly begun this great unraveling. I met Sergeant Brian Parks at the local Starbucks. I asked him why—given the open felony warrant—his department hadn't come after LaSota once she was arrested in Pennsylvania. "Right now, if I were to look at the system, there are probably 75 felony bench warrants," Parks said. "We don't have the luxury of trying to serve" them all, he said. "We're understaffed right now."

I told him what I'd heard in Pennsylvania from a source close to the case, that the authorities there had contacted Sonoma County about taking their prisoner. "I heard there was some communication between us and the agency in Pennsylvania," Parks said. "I don't know to what extent, so I really don't want to comment on that."

But did it frustrate him, I asked, that the original case felt like it would never get prosecuted? "I personally am not going to lose sleep over this matter," he said. "If they were here and running amok still, or running amok anywhere in the United States, causing concern for other agencies and people of our communities, then yeah, I'd want them prosecuted."

The next day, I drove to Vallejo. I'd arranged to meet Curtis Lind at the property where he had lost his eye and where Emma Borhanian had been killed. It remained scattered with containers and trailers, and a friend of Lind's had told me there were still tenants living there. I'd talked to Lind briefly the day before. But that morning I got a call from another friend of Lind's who said he'd changed his mind. He didn't want to "say anything that would change the case," she told me. "Or would make them come after him again."

The murder cases against Alex Leatham and Suri Dao, meanwhile, had sunk into a quagmire. To the distress of Leatham and her family, she was being housed in a men's jail despite demanding to be placed in a women's. And to the bafflement of Dao's lawyers, Dao demanded to be placed in a men's lockup after being assigned to a women's. In the year since their arrest, both had been accused by prosecutors of escape attempts. Back in late 2022, at the hospital following her gunshot wounds, Leatham had allegedly pretended to be asleep on a bench, and when the deputy guarding her had gone to the bathroom, managed to shuffle to an exit in leg shackles. She was captured 20 feet outside the door. She'd allegedly tried again outside a February hearing, requesting a wheelchair and then running for it, getting as far as a nearby fence. Dao, in the summer of 2023, had allegedly faked a seizure in a cell, then tried to run past the guards. According to the incident report, Dao had injured a hand trying to prevent the guards from shutting the door, then "banged her head on the cell window" while waiting for an ambulance.

Both defendants' lawyers argued that their clients were mentally incompetent to stand trial. This despite Leatham's objecting to having a lawyer at all, much less being declared insane. In her letters to the judge and outbursts in court, she insisted her thinking was sane and logical. "My coercively assigned council do not represent me," she wrote in July 2023. "I am rational. I do not have a 'mental illness' and I do not need 'treatment.'"

In some way, it felt like the theories that LaSota and Danielson had first spun up on their one-tug Rationalist Fleet were crashing into the messy reality of the justice system. Writing to the court, Leatham offered a rationalist-like case for her own rationality. "Yesterday I believed different things than I do today and tomorrow my beliefs about the world will change again. Yet I still complete plans I made yesterday," she wrote. "Everything I have said before the court is the truth according to the epistemic state I was in when I said it."

The judge disagreed. Based on testimony of doctors, he ruled that Leatham was "developmentally disabled and

incapable of cooperating with counsel in the conduct of their defense, and understanding the nature and purpose of the proceedings now pending against them." Leatham was committed to a mental health facility in Porterville, California, for a maximum of four years. Leatham would only go to trial if the facility, and then the judge, determined she'd returned to fitness.

In August 2023, Dao's attorneys asked that the criminal proceedings be suspended, believing that Dao was incompetent to stand trial. In a filing to the court, they wrote that their client had been suffering from depression, psychosis, and suicidal thoughts since the termination of their hormone therapy and had begun engaging in "self-mutilation." Dao, they told the court, "will not speak to attorneys, doctors, the court, or anyone else," and "appears mentally vacant, incognizant, and to be suffering from some type of dissociative identity disorder." Dao's own attorneys also cited "transgender issues"—including their client's wish to be referred to as "they" and placed in a men's jail—as an "objective manifestation" of Dao's incompetence. The case remained bogged down in mental health evaluations and hospital stays, and as 2023 bled into 2024 neither Leatham nor Dao was any closer to going to trial in California.

XIII

ON THE MORNING OF LASOTA'S rescheduled trial in Pennsylvania four months later, Judge Cappelli plowed through a half-dozen cases before calling CR-962-23. The prosecutor and LaSota's defense attorney, Daniel McGarrigle, strode to the bench. But no wheelchair rolled into the room. LaSota and her mother were nowhere to be found.

"Good morning, your honor," McGarrigle said. "I'm ready for trial. I have not had contact with my client since the last time we were here." In those four months, he'd spoken to LaSota's family, he said, but not LaSota directly, "and I'm unable to provide an update on my client's whereabouts at this time."

The judge gave McGarrigle until the following morning to reach his client. When he couldn't, the court issued a bench warrant for LaSota's arrest. As of December 2023, Ziz LaSota, wanted in two states, was officially in the wind.

XIV

MANY YEARS AGO, A THOUGHT experiment emerged out of the rationalist community called "Roko's basilisk." First posed on LessWrong by a user named Roko in 2010—and named for a mythical reptile that can kill with its glance—the premise loosely stated is this: If and when a superintelligent AI emerges, capable of dominating and subjugating humans, it will be inclined to punish those who tried to prevent it from coming into existence. Indeed, this superintelligent overlord may be inclined to punish even those who failed to spend their lives working to *bring* it into existence. If you knew that artificial superintelligence was possible, the thinking goes, yet still didn't devote your life to helping create it, it may subject you to unfathomable torture for that choice.

Roko's basilisk contained within it two insidious and mind-bending premises. The first was that merely being aware of the thought experiment instantly made you its potential victim. In the language of the rationalist community, it was an "infohazard." The second was the implication that an entity from the future—one that didn't yet exist, and perhaps never would—could somehow blackmail people in the present to help bring about its existence. "Work for my benefit," the future AI would be telling us, "or I will subject you to unimaginable pain." The idea so roiled the community that Eliezer Yudkowsky, the cofounder of LessWrong, banned mention of it from the forum entirely.

When Ziz LaSota first encountered Roko's basilisk in the mid-2010s, in her early years among the rationalists, she was inclined to dismiss it. Yudkowsky had by then declared that its premise was unfounded—"there's no incentive for a future agent to follow through with the threat," he wrote, "because by doing so it just expends resources at no gain to itself." He'd even un-banned it from LessWrong. But still, LaSota later wrote, "I started encountering people who were freaked out by it, freaked out they had discovered an 'improvement' to the infohazard that made it function, got around Eliezer's objection."

The more she thought about Roko's basilisk, the more she began to suffer from "intrusive thoughts about basilisks"—not just Roko's but others which she could never name. "Eventually I came to believe, in the gaps of frantically trying not to think about it," she wrote, "that if I persisted in trying to save the world, I would be tortured until the end of the universe by a coalition of all unfriendly AIs."

Upon discovering that her actions might lead to infinite torture and then examining her own resolve, LaSota was surprised to find that it held. She refused to be blackmailed, she concluded, by what might come. "Evil gods must be fought," she wrote. "If this damns me then so be it."

The more time I spent following the group that some called the Zizians, the more their story started seeming itself like some kind of basilisk. By virtue of having examined its events, you were trapped in its world, subject to its terms. Inside that world it felt like some future evil was rapidly approaching, ominous events waiting just beyond the horizon. But speaking of them could usher them faster, closer. I was certain the story as I understood it was incomplete but unsure where to look to complete it. Or, if I did, whether I could tell it without attracting the basilisk's gaze myself.

So I set the story aside, and waited.

ON JANUARY 14 OF THIS YEAR, authorities got a call from a hotel employee near Lyndonville, Vermont, about 30 miles from Michelle Zajko's old place in Coventry. Two people had checked in wearing "all-black tactical-style clothing with protective equipment," the employee said, according to court documents. One was carrying a gun, in a visible holster. (Open carry of firearms is legal in Vermont.) Agents from Homeland Security accompanied the Vermont State Police in responding to the call, and they "attempted to initiate a consensual conversation" with the black-clad guests. The pair—Milo Youngblut and Ophelia Bauckholt—said they had come to the area to look for property but declined to elaborate. They checked out that same day and relocated to nearby Newport. The police, meanwhile, kept them under sporadic surveillance.

Two days later, on the opposite coast, it appeared the trials of Leatham and Dao were, at long last, going forward. They'd both been declared competent, and in August, Curtis Lind had provided a videotaped account of his version of events to prosecutors. Now, on January 16, in anticipation of a spring trial date, prosecutors filed a motion noting that "Mr. Lind is the only eye-witness to this case and his testimony is critical for the People to have the ability to prove their case."

Lind, now 82, had put the Vallejo land up for sale after the incident and even received an all-cash offer of $300,000. But he couldn't bring himself to sell. He'd cleared off the tenants and the junk, but somehow over time both had drifted back. "He was there every day," one friend said, commuting more than an hour each way from Half Moon Bay. "For what? Just puttering around, from what I saw."

Lind still worried about someone taking vengeance for the attack, the friend said. "He mentioned a few times that they might come back and finish the job. He was, like, a wait-and-see character. We'll wait and see what happens, you know?"

January 17 was a clear, chilly day at the property. Lind was walking on Lemon Street, one block away, when a man wearing a black beanie, a mask, and a purple shirt emerged from hiding. The attacker approached Lind, put an arm around his neck, and began to stab him in the chest. Before fleeing, the man slit Lind's throat. When the police arrived, they found Lind unresponsive but still alive. He died at the hospital within the hour.

On January 19, in downtown Newport, Vermont, the law enforcement agents who had Youngblut and Bauckholt under "periodic surveillance" spotted them again in the same tactical gear, gun included. The next day, agents observed the pair at Walmart, where Bauckholt bought two boxes of aluminum foil. The agents saw Bauckholt wrapping two items in the foil, which would later turn out to be cell phones. Bauckholt made a call from another phone, and then the duo left, driving a blue Toyota Prius hatchback with North Carolina plates.

The Homeland Security agents had determined—wrongly, as it turned out—that Bauckholt, a German citizen, had an expired visa. So as the pair was driving down Interstate 91, three Border Patrol vehicles flipped on their lights and pulled the car over. According to federal prosecutors, Youngblut stepped out from the driver's seat, pulled out a Glock handgun, and fired at the agents, who began firing back. Bauckholt tried to draw a gun too. In the exchange, a Border Patrol agent named David "Chris" Maland was killed, along with Bauckholt. Youngblut was shot but alive, transported to a local hospital.

Several days later in Redding, California, the police arrested 22-year-old Maximilian Snyder and charged him with Curtis Lind's murder. Snyder, a Seattle-area native, had attended the prestigious private Lakeside School before obtaining a computer science and philosophy degree from Oxford. "I would like to help advance the technological frontier of humanity in a responsible manner," he'd written on his LinkedIn, "by contributing original research in the fields of artificial general intelligence and AI alignment."

While the murder of Lind might have remained a regional story, the killing of Maland—a 44-year-old US Air Force veteran and a nine-year member of the Border Patrol—was quickly national news. But it was local reporters who began to piece together the alleged connections, starting in Vermont. The regional news outlet VT Digger reported that a federal filing in Youngblut's case indicated that the person who allegedly purchased both guns for the duo was "a person of interest" in a double murder in Pennsylvania who had lived near Coventry. They didn't give the person's name, but as soon as I saw it I knew: Michelle Zajko.

The same filing argued that Youngblut, who was charged with forcible assault with a deadly weapon and discharging a firearm, should be detained while awaiting trial. Prosecutors noted that both

Youngblut and Zajko "are acquainted with and have been in frequent contact with an individual who was detained by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania during that homicide investigation; that individual is also a person of interest in a homicide investigation in Vallejo, California." The facts fit Ziz LaSota.

Reporters in Vallejo and Seattle uncovered a marriage license application between Snyder and Youngblut, who'd also attended Lakeside. Both were known in rationalist and effective altruist circles, as was Bauckholt. Bauckholt had been a quant trader who'd worked in New York and interned at Jane Street Capital, the same firm that once employed Sam Bankman-Fried. They were all young, technically gifted strivers, and their involvement summoned the kind of shocked responses that echoed those elicited by Borhanian and Leatham years before. "She seemed like a friendly nerd," one friend of Bauckholt's told me. "She was very into math and hosted some community discussion channels on Discord. I never knew she knew Ziz at all." Youngblut, who'd gone on to study computer science at the University of Washington, "was rather quiet, reserved," a high school classmate of both Youngblut's and Snyder's recalled, and "seemed incredibly harmless." Youngblut's family, similar to Daniel Blank's, had attempted to file a missing person's report for her months before. Snyder, by contrast, could come off as "macho" or "obnoxious," the classmate said. "It's shocking to even imagine the two of them, like, interacting, let alone interacting deeply enough to pursue a marriage certificate."

A "TRANS VEGAN DEATH CULT"? AN "OFFSHOOT OF THE RATIONALIST MOVEMENT"? AN "ANTIFASCIST CULT"? ANARCHISTS? THE STORY WAS IMMEDIATELY SUCKED UP INTO THE MAW OF THE CULTURE-WAR MACHINE.

Soon the national and international media was flooding in, trying to understand who and what the "Zizians" were. A "trans vegan death cult"? An "offshoot of the rationalist movement"? An "antifascist cult"? Anarchists? The events were immediately sucked up into the maw of the culture-war machine, recycled as a story of wokeness gone wild, a story of police overreach, an immigration story, or one about the inevitable product of an anti-trans culture.

In early February, Snyder dictated a 1,500-word letter to reporters at the San Francisco Chronicle, which the paper printed in full. In it, Snyder opened by saying, "I am not one of Ziz's friends," implicitly disclaiming the group's involvement in his alleged killing of the lone witness in their upcoming murder trial. He spent the rest of the statement addressing Eliezer Yudkowsky, half lecturing, half pleading with him to accept that animals are people, and bragging about his D&D skills.

With LaSota, Blank, and Zajko still missing, it was unclear how many adherents to LaSota's ideas might still be at large, directly connected to the group or not. After the story broke in January, Gwen Danielson's father told the Chronicle that rumors of her suicide were false. He'd spoken to her in recent months, he said. She had split from the group and was "completely under the radar." As for LaSota, the Associated Press reported that she'd been last spotted by the landlord of a North Carolina Airbnb as recently as December, seemingly staying with Youngblut and Bauckholt—and possibly Zajko—at a pair of condos where the group kept a box truck parked outside.

Then, on a Sunday afternoon in February, near the town of Frostburg in western Maryland, not far from the Pennsylvania border, a man saw a pair of white box trucks parked up a dirt road on his property. In and around them he found three people, dressed all in black. They asked if he would let them camp on the property for a month. Instead, he called the police, saying that he recognized the group from news reports.

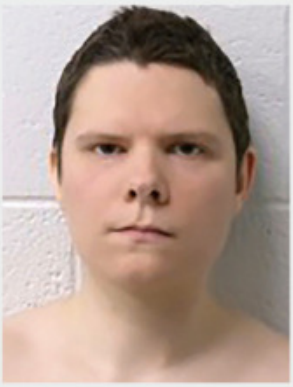
A pair of Maryland state troopers and units from the local sheriff's office responded. According to a criminal complaint, the lead trooper, Brandon Jeffries, first spotted Daniel Blank, seated in the cab of one of the trucks. When Jeffries ordered him to show his hands, Blank responded that he had a learning disability and couldn't understand.

While another trooper covered Blank, Jeffries and the sheriff's deputies approached the other truck, where Jeffries had seen a figure wiping fog from the window. When they pulled open the back door, they found LaSota and Zajko, both wearing ammo belts. The pair fled to the cab through an inner doorway, then refused to exit the truck. At Lasota's feet was a handgun. Zajko "was crying," Jeffries wrote in the complaint, "saying not to kill her." The pair wouldn't give their names, and after Zajko tucked her hands into her armpits, the police took her to the ground. When they did, an officer found another handgun, loaded with 12 rounds, tucked into her waistband.

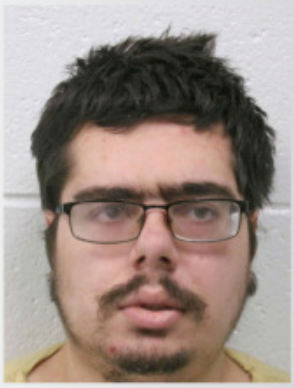
All three were arrested for trespassing and obstructing an officer. Zajko was charged with possession of the handgun, LaSota for transporting another gun found in the vehicle. In their new booking photos, compared to their last public images, Zajko now had close-cropped hair, and Blank seemed to have put on weight. But LaSota, with her long sandy-blond hair, looked strikingly similar to how she had five years before, at Westminster Woods.

A few days later, federal prosecutors in Vermont charged Michelle with providing a false address when she purchased two of the guns used in the Border Patrol shootout. In March, on the West Coast, Maximilian Snyder pleaded not guilty, while the trials of Leatham and Dao were postponed yet again. The Maryland prosecutors added additional gun charges for LaSota, Zajko, and Blank and scheduled their trials for the summer. In a court hearing, LaSota said, "I haven't done anything wrong. I shouldn't be here." Zajko, meanwhile, penned a 20-page letter to the Associated Press in which she reportedly disclaimed any connection to Snyder, extolled her friendship with LaSota, and proclaimed, "I didn't murder my parents."

ZIZ LASOTA



MICHELLE ZAJKO



DANIEL BLANK

IN THE WAKE OF THE JANUARY 2025 murders and the ensuing media maelstrom, many in the rationalist community turned, as they always had, to the pseudonymous safety of LessWrong. There they tried to make sense of what happened, worried over how the public would now view them and their causes, and warned each other against speaking to journalists. One poster suggested, tentatively, that whatever the "Zizians" were, or are, might be the product of seeing the world too starkly through rationalist eyes. "I haven't seen others on LW with this sentiment, maybe they've felt afraid to express it (as I do)," the person wrote. "They were alienated altruists who couldn't handle this world and seemingly went a little insane. (given the incorrect beliefs about decision theory). Most people struggle to stay dispassionately rational when faced with something which they regard as very morally bad. It is hard to live in a world one believes to contain atrocities."

The MIRI, CFAR, EA triumvirate promised not just that you could be the hero of your own story but that your heroism could be deployed in the service of saving humanity itself from certain destruction. Is it so surprising that this promise attracted people who were not prepared to be bit players in group housing dramas and abstract technical papers? That they might come to believe, perhaps in the throes of their own mental health struggles, that saving the world required a different kind of action—by them, specifically, and no one else?

To Rosanne Zajko, whose family had actually suffered atrocities difficult to comprehend, each revelation leading up to Michelle's arrest, and each day without a resolution, had been like a new wound. She'd wanted to see her niece caught, she said. But whatever the legal system produced would never constitute a complete explanation. "She's a smart person, and she's a logical person," she said, "and this kind of behavior does not sound smart or logical to me."

Logic. Rationality. Intelligence. Somewhere in all these attempts to harness them for our shared humanity, they'd been warped and twisted to destroy it.

One of the last things LaSota seems to have written for public consumption was a comment she left on her own blog in July 2022, one month before she supposedly went overboard in San Francisco Bay. "Statists come threaten me to snitch whatever info I have on their latest missing persons," she wrote, seemingly referring to deaths by suicide that had already happened among those who'd embraced her ideas. "Did I strike them down in a horrific act of bloody vengeance? Did I drive them to suicide by whistling komm susser tod?"—a German phrase that translates as "come, sweet death." "Maybe they died in a series of experimental brain surgeries that I performed without anesthetic since that's against my religion, in an improvised medical facility?"

Below it was pasted a stock photo of two people wearing shirts that read, "I can neither confirm nor deny."

A few hours later, she offered up another thought. "Don't trust anyone over 30," she wrote, "with a kill count of 0."

EVAN RATLIFF *is a longtime* WIRED *contributor, the host of* Shell Game*, and the author of* The Mastermind: A True Story of Murder, Empire, and a New Kind of Crime Lord.

ALLEGANY COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE/AP

THE PRETTEE

by

Bobbie Johnson

ON PAPER, THE FIRST candidate looked perfect. Thomas was from rural Tennessee and had studied computer science at the University of Missouri. His résumé said he'd been a professional programmer for eight years, and he'd breezed through a preliminary coding test. All of this was excellent news for Thomas' prospective boss, Simon Wijckmans, founder of the web security startup C.Side. The 27-year-old Belgian was based in London but was looking for ambitious, fully remote coders.

Thomas had an Anglo-Saxon surname, so Wijckmans was surprised when he clicked into his Google Meet and found himself speaking with a heavily accented young man of Asian origin. Thomas had set a generic image of an office as his background. His internet connection was laggy—odd for a professional coder—and his end of the call was noisy. To Wijckmans, Thomas sounded like he was sitting in a large, crowded space, maybe a dorm or a call center.

Wijckmans fired off his interview questions, and Thomas' responses were solid enough. But Wijckmans noticed that Thomas seemed most interested in asking about his salary. He didn't come across as curious about the actual work or about how the company operated or even about benefits like startup stock or health coverage. Odd, thought Wijckmans. The conversation came to a close, and he got ready for the next interview in his queue.

Once again, the applicant said they were based in the US, had an Anglo name, and appeared to be a young Asian man with a thick, non-American accent. He used a basic virtual background, was on a terrible internet connection, and had a single-minded focus on salary. This candidate, though, was wearing glasses. In the lenses, Wijckmans spotted the reflection of multiple screens, and he could make out a white chatbox with messages scrolling by. "He was clearly either chatting with somebody or on some AI tool," Wijckmans remembers.

On high alert, Wijckmans grabbed screenshots and took notes. After the call ended, he went back over the job applications. He found that his company's listings were being flooded with applicants just like these: an opening for a full-stack developer got more than 500 applications in a day, far more than usual. And when he looked more deeply into the applicants' coding tests, he saw that many candidates appeared to have used a virtual private network, or VPN, which allows you to mask your computer's true location.

Wijckmans didn't know it yet, but he'd stumbled onto the edges of an audacious, global cybercrime operation. He'd unwittingly made contact

photographs by

Julia Chesky and Darrell Jackson

NODERS

Remote colleague? Keeps the camera off in meetings? Might be a North Korean operative who sneaked into your company with a stolen identity and a heavy dose of ChatGPT.

with an army of seemingly unassuming IT workers, deployed to work remotely for American and European companies under false identities, all to bankroll the government of North Korea.

With a little help from some friends on the ground, of course.

•••

CHRISTINA CHAPMAN WAS living in a trailer in Brook Park, Minnesota, a hamlet north of Minneapolis, when she got a note from a recruiter that changed her life. A bubbly 44-year-old with curly red hair and glasses, she loved her dogs and her mom and posting social justice content on TikTok. In her spare time she listened to K-pop, enjoyed Renaissance fairs, and got into cosplay. Chapman was also, according to her sparse online résumé, learning to code online.

It was March 2020 when she clicked on the message in her LinkedIn account. A foreign company was looking for somebody to "be the US face" of the business. The company needed help finding remote employment for overseas workers. Chapman signed on. It's unclear how fast her workload grew, but by October 2022 she could afford a move from chilly Minnesota to a low-slung, four-bedroom house in Litchfield Park, Arizona. It wasn't fancy—a suburban corner lot with a few thin trees—but it was a big upgrade over the trailer.

Chapman then started documenting more of her life on TikTok and YouTube, mostly talking about her diet, fitness, or mental health. In one chatty video, shared in June 2023, she described grabbing breakfast on the go—an açaí bowl and a smoothie—because work was so busy. "My clients are going crazy!" she complained. In the background, the camera caught a glimpse of metal racks holding at least a dozen open laptops covered in sticky notes. A few months later, federal investigators raided Chapman's home, seized the laptops, and eventually filed charges alleging that she had spent three years aiding the "illicit revenue generation efforts" of the government of North Korea.

For maybe a decade, North Korean intelligence services have been training young IT workers and sending them abroad in teams, often to China or Russia. From these bases, they scour the web for job listings all over, usually in software engineering, and usually with Western companies. They favor roles that are fully remote, with solid wages, good access to data and systems, and few responsibilities. Over time they began applying for these jobs using stolen or fake identities and relying on members of their criminal teams to provide fictional

references; some have even started using AI to pass coding tests, video interviews, and background checks.

But if an applicant lands a job offer, the syndicate needs somebody on the ground in the country the applicant claims to live in. A fake employee, after all, can't use the addresses or bank accounts linked to their stolen IDs, and they can't dial in to a company's networks from overseas without instantly triggering suspicion. That's where someone like Christina Chapman comes in.

As the "facilitator" for hundreds of North Korea–linked jobs, Chapman signed fraudulent documents and handled some of the fake workers' salaries. She would often receive their paychecks in one of her bank accounts, take a cut, and wire the rest overseas: Federal prosecutors say Chapman was promised as much as 30 percent of the money that passed through her hands.

Her most important job, though, was tending the "laptop farm." After being hired, a fake worker will typically ask for their company computer to be sent to a different address than the one on record—usually with some tale about a last-minute move or needing to stay with a sick relative. The new address, of course, belongs to the facilitator, in this case Chapman. Sometimes the facilitator forwards the laptop to an address overseas, but more commonly that person holds onto it and installs software that allows it to be controlled remotely. Then the fake employee can connect to their machine from anywhere in the world while appearing to be in the US. ("You know how to install Anydesk?" one North Korean operative asked Chapman in 2022. "I do it practically EVERYDAY!" she replied.)

In messages with her handlers, Chapman discussed sending government forms like the I-9, which attests that a person is legally able to work in the US. ("I did my best to copy your signature," she wrote. "Haha. Thank you," came the response.) She also did basic tech troubleshooting and dialed into meetings on a worker's behalf, sometimes on short notice, as in this conversation from November 2023:

> ***Worker:*** *We are going to have laptop setup meeting in 20 mins. Can you join Teams meeting and follow what IT guy say? Because it will require to restart laptop multiple times and I can not handle that. You can mute and just follow what they say …*
>
> ***Chapman:*** *Who do I say I am?*
>
> ***Worker:*** *You don't have to say, I will be joining there too.*
>
> ***Chapman:*** *I just typed in the name Daniel. If they ask WHY you are using two devices, just say the microphone on your laptop doesn't work right … Most IT people are fine with that explanation.*

Sometimes, she got jumpy. "I hope you guys can find other people to do your physical I9s," she wrote to her bosses in 2023, according to court documents. "I will SEND them for you, but have someone else do the paperwork. I can go to FEDERAL PRISON for falsifying federal documents." Michael Barnhart, an investigator at cybersecurity company DTEX and a leading expert on the North Korean IT worker threat, says Chapman's involvement followed a standard pattern—from an innocuous initial contact on LinkedIn to escalating requests. "Little by little, the asks get bigger and bigger," he says. "Then by the end of the day, you're asking the facilitator to go to a government facility to pick up an actual government ID."

By the time investigators raided Chapman's home, she was housing several dozen laptops, each with a sticky note indicating the fake worker's identity and employer. Some of the North Korean operatives worked multiple jobs; some had been toiling quietly for years. Prosecutors said at least 300 employers had been pulled into this single scheme, including "a top-five national television network and media company, a premier Silicon Valley technology company, an aerospace and defense manufacturer, an iconic American car manufacturer, a high-end retail store, and one of the most recognizable media and entertainment companies in the world." Chapman, they alleged, had helped pass along at least $17 million. She pleaded guilty in February 2025 to charges relating to wire fraud, identity theft, and money laundering and is awaiting sentencing.

Chapman's case is just one of several North Korean fake-worker prosecutions making their way through US courts. A Ukrainian named Oleksandr Didenko has been accused of setting up a freelancing website to connect fake IT workers with stolen identities. Prosecutors say at least one worker was linked to Chapman's laptop farm and that Didenko also has ties to operations in San Diego and Virginia. Didenko was arrested in Poland last year and was extradited to the United States. In Tennessee, 38-year-old Matthew Knoot is due to stand trial for his alleged role in a scheme that investigators say sent hundreds of thousands of dollars to

The pandemic dramatically expanded the number of remote jobs, and Pyongyang saw the perfect opportunity.

Simon Wijckmans was flooded with suspicious applicants for a developer job at his company and came up with a plan to thwart them.

DARRELL JACKSON

accounts linked to North Korea via his laptop farm in Nashville. (Knoot has pleaded not guilty.) And in January 2025, Florida prosecutors filed charges against two American citizens, Erick Ntekereze Prince and Emanuel Ashtor, as well as a Mexican accomplice and two North Koreans. (None of the defendants' lawyers in these cases responded to requests for comment.) The indictments claim that Prince and Ashtor had spent six years running a string of fake staffing companies that placed North Koreans in at least 64 businesses.

• • •

BEFORE THE HERMIT KINGDOM had its laptop farms, it had a single confirmed internet connection, at least as far as the outside world could tell. As recently as 2010, that one link to the web was reserved for use by high-ranking officials. Then, in 2011, 27-year-old Kim Jong Un succeeded his father as the country's dictator. Secretly educated in Switzerland and said to be an avid gamer, the younger Kim made IT a national priority. In 2012, he urged some schools to "pay special attention to intensifying their computer education" to create new possibilities for the government and military. Computer science is now on some high school curricula, while college students can take courses on information security, robotics, and engineering. The most promising are taught hacking techniques and foreign languages that can make them more effective operatives. Staff from government agencies including the Reconnaissance General Bureau—the nation's clandestine intelligence service—recruit the highest-scoring graduates of top schools like Kim Chaek University of Technology (described by many as "the MIT of North Korea") or the prestigious University of Sciences in Pyongsong. They are promised good wages and unfettered access to the internet—the real internet, not the intranet available to well-off North Koreans, which consists of a mere handful of heavily censored North Korean websites.

The earliest cyberattacks launched by Pyongyang were simple affairs: defacing websites with political messages or launching denial-of-service attacks to shut down US websites. They soon grew more audacious. In 2014, North Korean hackers famously stole and leaked confidential information from Sony's film studio. Then they targeted financial institutions: Fraudulent trades pulled more than $81 million from the Bank of Bangladesh's accounts at the New York Federal Reserve. After that, North Korean hackers moved into ransomware—the WannaCry attack in 2017 locked hundreds of thousands of Windows computers in 150 countries and demanded payments in bitcoin. While the amount of revenue the attack generated is up for debate—some say it earned just $140,000 in payouts—it wreaked much wider damage as companies worked to upgrade their systems and security, costing as much as $4 billion, according to one estimate.

Governments responded with more sanctions and stronger security measures, and the regime pivoted, dialing back on ransomware in favor of quieter schemes. It turns out these are also more lucrative: Today, the most valuable tool in North Korea's cybercrime armory is cryptocurrency theft. In 2022, hackers stole more than $600 million worth of the cryptocurrency ether by attacking the blockchain game *Axie Infinity*; in February of this year, they robbed the Dubai-based crypto exchange Bybit of $1.5 billion worth of digital currency. The IT pretender scam, meanwhile, seems to have been

JULIA CHESKY

growing slowly until the pandemic dramatically expanded the number of remote jobs, and Pyongyang saw the perfect opportunity.

In 2024, according to a recent report from South Korea's National Intelligence Service, the number of people working in North Korea's cyber divisions—which includes pretenders, crypto thieves, and military hackers—stood at 8,400, up from 6,800 two years earlier. Some of these workers are based in the country, but many are stationed overseas in China, Russia, Pakistan, or elsewhere. They are relatively well compensated, but their posting is hardly cushy. Teams of 10 to 20 young men live and work out of a single apartment, sleeping four or five to a room and grinding up to 14 hours a day at weird hours to correspond with their remote job's time zone. They have quotas of illicit earnings they are expected to meet. Their movements are tightly controlled, as are those of their relatives, who are effectively held hostage to prevent defections. "You don't have any freedom," says Hyun-Seung Lee, a North Korean defector who lives in Washington, DC, and says some of his old friends were part of such operations. "You're not allowed to leave the apartment unless you need to purchase something, like grocery shopping, and that is arranged by the team leader. Two or three people must go together so there's no opportunity for them to explore."

The US government estimates that a typical team of pretenders can earn up to $3 million each year for Pyongyang. Experts say the money is pumped into everything from Kim Jong Un's personal slush fund to the country's nuclear weapons program. A few million dollars may seem small next to the flashy crypto heists—but with so many teams operating in obscurity, the fraud is effective precisely because it is so mundane.

•••

IN THE SUMMER OF 2022, a major multinational company hired a remote engineer to work on website development. "He would dial in to meetings, he would participate in discussions," an executive at the company told me on condition of anonymity. "His manager said he was considered the most productive member of the team."

One day, his coworkers organized a surprise to celebrate his birthday. Colleagues gathered on a video call to congratulate him, only to be startled by his response—*but it's not my birthday*. After nearly a year at the company, the worker had apparently forgotten the birth date listed in his records. It was enough to spark suspicion, and soon afterward the security team discovered that he was running remote access tools on his work computer, and he was let go. It was only later, when federal investigators discovered one of his pay stubs at Christina Chapman's laptop farm in Arizona, that the company connected the dots and realized it had employed a foreign agent for nearly a year.

For many pretenders, the goal is simply to earn a good salary to send back to Pyongyang, not so much to steal money or data. "We've seen long-tail operations where they were going 10, 12, 18 months working in some of these organizations," says Adam Meyers, a senior vice president for counter adversary operations at the security company CrowdStrike.

Sometimes, though, North Korean operatives last just a few days—enough time to download huge amounts of company data or plant malicious software in a company's systems before abruptly quitting. That code could alter financial data or manipulate security information. Or these seeds could lay dormant for months, even years. "The potential risk from even one minute of access to systems is almost unlimited for an individual company," says Declan Cummings, the head of engineering at software company Cinder.

Experts say that attacks are ramping up not just in the US but also in Germany, France, Britain, Japan and other countries. They urge companies to do rigorous due diligence: speak directly to references, watch for candidates making sudden changes of address, use reputable online screening tools, and conduct a physical interview or in-person ID verification. But none of these methods are foolproof, and AI tools are constantly weakening them. ChatGPT and the like give almost anyone the capacity to answer esoteric questions in real time with unearned confidence, and their fluency with coding threatens to make programming tests irrelevant. AI video filters and deepfakes can also add to the subterfuge.

At an onboarding call, for instance, many HR representatives now ask new employees to hold their ID up to the camera for closer inspection. "But the fraudsters have a neat trick there," says Donal Greene, a biometrics expert at the online background check provider Certn. They take a green-colored card the exact shape and size of an identity card—a mini green screen—and, using deepfake

Agents have even been known to send look-alikes to pick up a physical ID card from an office or to take a drug test required by an employer.

technology, project the image of an ID onto it. "They can actually move it and show the reflection," says Greene. "It's very sophisticated." North Korean agents have even been known to send look-alikes to pick up a physical ID card from an office or to take a drug test required by prospective employers.

Even security experts can be fooled. In July 2024, Knowbe4, a Florida-based company that offers security training, discovered that a new hire known as "Kyle" was actually a foreign agent. "He interviewed great," says Brian Jack, KnowBe4's chief information security officer. "He was on camera, his résumé was right, his background check cleared, his ID cleared verification. We didn't have any reason to suspect this wasn't a valid candidate." But when his facilitator—the US-based individual giving him cover—tried to install malware on Kyle's company computer, the security team caught on and shut him out.

•••

BACK IN LONDON, SIMON Wijckmans couldn't let go of the idea that somebody had tried to fool him. He'd just read about the Knowbe4 case, which deepened his suspicions. He conducted background checks and discovered that some of his candidates were definitely using stolen identities. And, he found, some of them were linked to known North Korean operations. So Wijckmans decided to wage a little counter exercise of his own, and he invited me to observe.

I dial in to Google Meet at 3 am Pacific time, tired and bleary. We deliberately picked this offensively early hour because it's 6 am in Miami, where the candidate, "Harry," claims to be.

Harry joins the call, looking pretty fresh-faced. He's maybe in his late twenties, with short, straight, black hair. Everything about him seems deliberately nonspecific: He wears a plain black crewneck sweater and speaks into an off-brand headset. "I just woke up early today for this interview, no problem," he says. "I know that working with UK hours is kind of a requirement, so I can get my working hours to yours, so no problem with it."

So far, everything matches the hallmarks of a fake worker. Harry's virtual background is one of the default options provided by Google Meet, and his connection is a touch slow. His English is good but heavily accented,

So far, everything matches the hallmarks of a fake worker—his virtual background, his slow connection, his good but heavily accented English.

JULIA CHESKY

even though he tells us he was born in New York and grew up in Brooklyn.

Wijckmans starts with some typical interview questions, and Harry keeps glancing off to his right as he responds. He talks about various coding languages and name-drops the frameworks he's familiar with. Wijckmans starts asking some deeper technical questions. Harry pauses. He looks confused. "Can I rejoin the meeting?" he asks. "I have a problem with my microphone." Wijckmans nods, and Harry disappears.

A couple of minutes pass, and I start to fret that we've scared him away, but then he pops back into the meeting. His connection isn't much better, but his answers are clearer. Maybe he restarted his chatbot, or got a coworker to coach him. The call runs a few more minutes and we say goodbye.

Our next applicant calls himself "Nic." On his résumé he's got a link to a personal website, but this guy doesn't look much like the profile photo on the site. This is his second interview with Wijckmans, and we are certain that he's faking it: He's one of the applicants who failed the background check after his first call, although he doesn't know that.

Nic's English is worse than Harry's: When he's asked what time it is, he tells us it's "six and past" before correcting himself and saying "quarter to seven." Where does he live? "I'm in Ohio for now," he beams, like a kid who got something right in a pop quiz.

Several minutes in, though, his answers become nonsensical. Simon asks him a question about web security. "Political leaders … government officials or the agencies responsible for border security," Nic says. "They're responsible for monitoring and also securing the borders, so we can employ the personnel to patrol the borders and also check the documents and enforce the immigration laws."

I'm swapping messages with Wijckmans on the back channel we've set up when it dawns on us: Whatever AI bot Nic seems to be using must have misinterpreted a mention of "Border Gateway Protocol"—a system for sending traffic across the internet—with national borders, and started spewing verbiage about immigration enforcement. "What a waste of time," Wijckmans messages me. We wrap up the conversation abruptly.

I try to put myself in the seat of a hiring manager or screener who's under pressure. The fraudsters' words may not have always made sense, but their test scores and résumés looked solid, and their technical-sounding guff might be enough to fool an uninformed recruiter. I suspect at least one of them could have made it to the next step in some unsuspecting company's hiring process.

Wijckmans tells me he has a plan if he comes across another pretender. He has created a web page that looks like a standard coding assessment, which he'll send to fake candidates. As soon as they hit the button to start the test, their browser will spawn dozens of pop-up pages that bounce around the screen, all of them featuring information on how to defect from North Korea. Then loud music plays—a rickroll, "The Star-Spangled Banner"—before the computer starts downloading random files and emits an ear-splitting beep. "Just a little payback," he says.

Wijckman's stunt is not going to stop the pretenders, of course. But maybe it will irritate them for a moment. Then they'll get back to work, signing on from some hacking sweatshop in China or through a laptop farm in the US, and join the next team meeting—a quiet, camera-off chat with coworkers just like me or you.

BOBBIE JOHNSON *is a writer and editor based in San Francisco.*

COLOPHON

Hustles that helped get this issue out:

Streaming YouTube Premium on my ex-roommate's account; squirreling away the good office snacks in my desk drawer for later use; ignoring my allergist's advice to stop petting dogs; working events at my best friend's wine shop, to which I bring a certain charisma and unjaded enthusiasm (and reap the rewards in the form of free wine and occasionally generous tips); finding a $20 bill on the sidewalk and walking directly into a bar to tip excessively on one $8 drink; constantly picking up the restaurant tab for the credit card points; watching *The Last of Us* Season 2 premiere using my ex's parents' login credentials; refolding all my clothes the right way after my husband has folded them his way; getting a refund for a $130 pair of boots that never arrived, then finding them on my porch the next day; getting my eyeballs scanned in the thin hope of receiving some crypto rewards; selling old perfumes on Facebook Marketplace.

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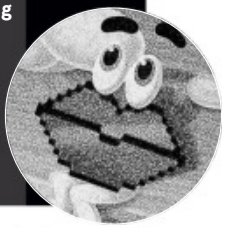
MURDERERS' ROWS

We mapped the characters in this issue using Dungeons & Dragons rules: law vs. chaos, good vs. evil. Tag yourself. —THE EDITORS

	LAWFUL	NEUTRAL	CHAOTIC
GOOD	**Amber Scorah** DEFENDER OF WHISTLEBLOWERS, COFOUNDER OF PSST (P.12)	**Jay Graber** THE ANTI-TWITTER CEO OF BLUESKY (P.20)	**The Zizians —in their own minds** (P.62) **WIRED magazine**
NEUTRAL	**Guy who preps convicted tech bros for prison** (P.14)	**Luigi Mangione—at least in a kind of averaged-out sense** (P.16)	**Mike Smith** FAILED JAZZ MUSICIAN (P.54) **Esoteric programming languages** (P.18) **Akasha Song** GOD OF DMT (P.32) 
EVIL	**Designers of 3D-printed ghost guns** (P.16)	**Format Boy** NIGERIAN SCAMFLUENCER (P.7) **North Korean operatives posing as American IT workers** (P.80)	**The Zizians —according to prosecutors** (P.62) **Kevin Bui** IPHONE MURDERER (P.46)

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